

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

ISSUE 20

PLUS

**YUICHIRO
NAGAI**

The 2007 AFC
Champions League
MVP recalls his
night of glory



**ASIAN
CUP**
ROAD TO RUSSIA

**Final Round of
Fixtures: Review**

**SON
HEUNG-MIN**

Korea Republic star aiming big with
both club and country

ISSUE
20

Oct 2017



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Thailand and Hokkaido
Consadole Sapporo midfielder
reveals he has fulfilled an
ambition by playing in Japan



HAMMADI AHMED

Air Force Club captain on
AFC Cup success and life
as the star man with
the Baghdad side



GURPREET SINGH

India's number one goalkeeper
has returned to his homeland
with JSW Bengaluru ahead
of a crucial year



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AFC QUARTERLY

Issue No. 20

October - December 2017

Official quarterly publication of the Asian Football Confederation

Published on behalf of the Asian Football Confederation by Lagardère Sports

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Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



Dear friends,

In the last few weeks Asia has witnessed one of the most exciting conclusions to a FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign.

The congratulations of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) must go to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Japan and Korea Republic who qualified directly for the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia.

The fact that the Asian places, except for IR Iran, were only decided in the final two match days shows the competitiveness that exists in football on our great continent. We wish them well in Russia next year.

The world has marvelled at the achievement of Syria in reaching the Asian Play-off and they will face Australia in Melaka, Malaysia, and in Sydney, Australia, for the right to play CONCACAF's fourth-placed team for the final Inter-Confederation place in Russia.

The AFC, in our Vision and Mission, has looked to ensure that our teams succeed on the world stage and create successful Asian teams by providing continual support in order to help our sides succeed on the world stage.

We need to ensure that our competitions continue to thrive. That is certainly the case with the AFC Asian Cup which is also in its final qualifying stages. The United Arab Emirates hosts the competition in 2019 when the AFC Asian Cup expands to 24 teams. This, like the new format of the AFC Cup, gives more Member Associations and more teams the opportunity to experience high-level competition.

In the AFC Cup we must congratulate Air Force Club the West Zone Champions, FC Istiklol of Tajikistan the Central Zone Champions, JSW Bengaluru the South Zone Champions, the ASEAN Zone winners Ceres Negros of Philippines and East Zone Champions 4.25 SC from DPR Korea. The AFC created history with the first-ever live streaming of an AFC match on Facebook Live from Bengaluru.

The AFC Cup, like our pinnacle club competition, the AFC Champions League, comes to a thrilling conclusion in November. We have also been privileged to see some outstanding performances in recent rounds of the AFC Champions League, which continues to excite audiences across the continent.

We must congratulate DPR Korea for winning the AFC U-16 Women's Championship in Chonburi and thank the Football Association of Thailand for their support and excellent staging of the event.

Football in Asia continues to thrive on and off the field and we now look forward to our grand finale – with the completion of the FIFA World Cup qualifying and the finals of the AFC Champions League and AFC Cup in the coming weeks.

It has been another outstanding season for football in Asia. One Asia, One Goal.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



At the heart of the image

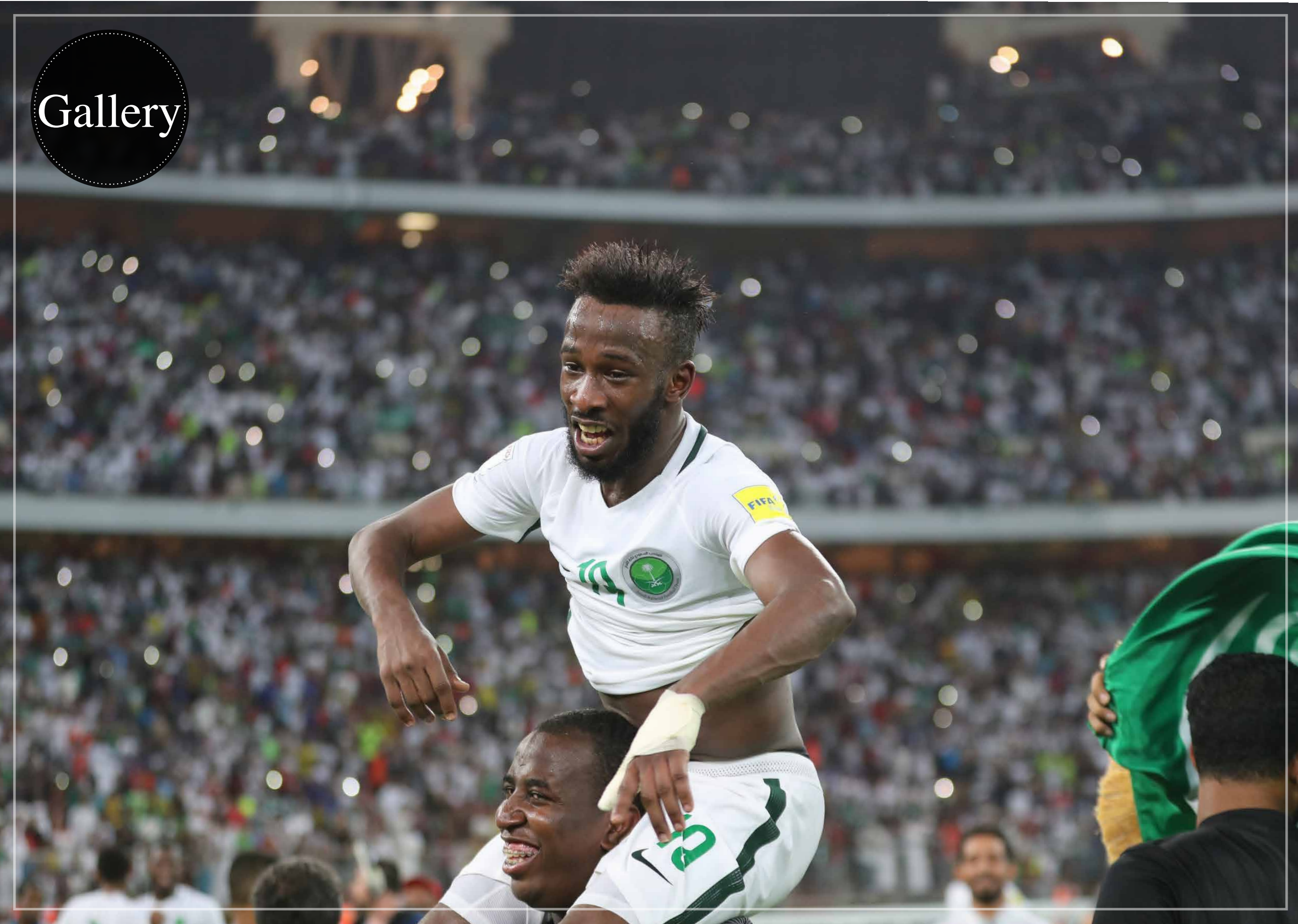
Gallery



.....
**Sheer
Delight**
.....

Tamer Haj Mohamad became the first person to breach the Islamic Republic of Iran defence in Group A of the FIFA World Cup qualifiers as Syria ultimately secured a 2-2 draw in Tehran in September and a play-off date with Australia.

Gallery



Jeddah Joy

A full house at King Abdullah Sports City saw Saudi Arabia qualify for their first FIFA World Cup since 2006 after local boy Fahad Al Muwallad's second-half strike claimed a narrow 1-0 victory over Japan in Group B.

Gallery



.....
Warm Embrace
.....

Luiz Felipe Scolari and Andre Villas-Boas renewed acquaintances with each other ahead of a thrilling AFC Champions League quarter-final second leg that saw Shanghai SIPG overcome Guangzhou Evergrande on penalties after the tie ended 5-5 on aggregate.

Gallery



Comeback Kings

Urawa Red Diamonds recovered from a 3-1 first-leg deficit against domestic rivals Kawasaki Frontale to post a remarkable 4-1 victory in the return fixture in Saitama to advance to the AFC Champions League semi-finals.



Trio Qualify For Russia 2018; Australia Progress To Play-off

KOREA REPUBLIC, JAPAN AND SAUDI ARABIA JOINED THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN AS ASIA'S FOUR CONFIRMED REPRESENTATIVES AT THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP, WHILE AUSTRALIA SET UP AN INTER-CONTINENTAL PLAY-OFF DATE WITH HONDURAS.

Korea Republic will appear in their 10th FIFA World Cup after a scoreless draw with Uzbekistan on Matchday Ten was enough to take the second qualification place in Group A. Japan's 2-0 defeat of Australia on Matchday Nine wrapped up top spot in Group B as the Samurai Blue advanced to a sixth FIFA World Cup, while Saudi Arabia's 1-0 victory over the Japanese on Matchday Ten ensured the runners-up berth.

Having finished third in their respective groups, meanwhile, Australia and Syria faced off in the Continental Play-off and Tim Cahill's second-leg brace secured a 2-1 victory after extra-time as the Socceroos progressed 3-2 on aggregate.

Australia will next play Honduras in the Inter-Continental Play-off as they bid to make a fourth

successive FIFA World Cup.

Shin Tae-yong's Korea went into their penultimate game against group winners Iran with their qualification hopes in the balance, and a 0-0 draw then set up a do-or-die clash with Uzbekistan in Tashkent.

But a second consecutive scoreless stalemate five days later ensured the Koreans did just enough to progress to a ninth FIFA World Cup in a row.

"This is the ninth successive time we have qualified for the World Cup and it is the moment we were waiting for," said Shin.

"We attacked well against a good team in Uzbekistan and we now have more than 10 months to prepare for the World Cup."

Omar Al Soma's injury-time equaliser, meanwhile, saw Syria snatch a 2-2 draw with Iran in Tehran to pip Uzbekistan to third place on goal difference and set up a play-off date

with Australia.

Japan booked their spot in Russia with a game to spare as goals from Takuma Asano and Yosuke Ideguchi saw off Australia 2-0 in Saitama.

The result meant Japan moved four points clear of Saudi Arabia and the Australians ahead of the final round of fixtures.

"We wanted to make some new history and worked hard for that with passion," said Asano.

"I really had the feeling of wanting to contribute today by scoring, so I'm relieved that I was able to do that – it's the best feeling."

Fahad Al Muwallad's solitary strike against Japan in Jeddah five days later saw Saudi Arabia finish in second place and book their ticket to Russia as Australia finished in third before overcoming the Syrians over two legs.



India, Palestine & Oman Advance To AFC Asian Cup

THREE TEAMS JOINED THE 12 THAT HAVE ALREADY QUALIFIED FOR THE AFC ASIAN CUP UAE 2019 AS INDIA, PALESTINE AND OMAN BOOKED THEIR TICKET FOLLOWING VICTORIES ON MATCHDAY FOUR.

India qualified to a first AFC Asian Cup since 2011 after a 4-1 win over Macau at Sree Kanteerava Stadium in Bengaluru maintained their perfect record in Group A to guarantee a top-two finish.

Rowlin Bores, Sunil Chhetri and Jeje Lalpekhlu were all on target, while Macau's Lam Ka-seng netted an own goal. Niki Torrao did, though, end India's run of cleansheets with his first-half strike.

India moved eight points clear of the Kyrgyz Republic and Myanmar, whose 2-2 draw in Yangon left the pair on four points and in a battle for second place, while Macau are rooted to the bottom of the table and remain in search of their first points.

It will be the Blue Tigers' fourth appearance at the continental competition after also being part of the 1964 and 1984

editions, while in 2011 in Qatar, the South Asians lost all three of their games as they exited at the first hurdle.

In Group D, Palestine and Oman wrapped up the two qualification places after wins over Bhutan and the Maldives respectively meant they cannot be caught at the top of the standings.

Captain Abdallatif Al Bahdari scored a hat-trick in a 10-0 victory over Bhutan in Hebron as Palestine made it four wins from four to advance to their second successive AFC Asian Cup.

Palestine qualified for the continental competition for the first time after winning the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup and their rapid rise has continued in qualifying for the 2019 edition, with a 2-1 victory over Oman in June a standout performance.

Oman's 3-1 win over the Maldives leaves

them three points adrift of the Palestinians with two games to play as they progressed to the competition for the fourth time.

The Gulf state have won three of their four games in Group D and, with 23 goals, are the top scorers in the qualifying campaign.

A final-day showdown with Palestine in Muscat next March will likely decide who advances as table-toppers.

The fifteen teams who are already confirmed at the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 are: Australia, China, India, Iraq, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Korea Republic, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan.

Nine places remain up for grabs with the next round of qualifiers to take place in November.



Quartet Share Toyota Top Goalscorer Award

MOHANAD ABDULRAHEEM, NAWAF AL ABED, TOMI JURIC AND AHMED KHALIL HAVE SHARED THE TOYOTA TOP GOALSCORER AWARD AFTER NETTING FIVE GOALS APIECE IN THE FIFA WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS.

Five goals in 10 games saw Iraq's Mohanad Abdulraheem, Nawaf Al Abed of Saudi Arabia, Australia's Tomi Juric and Ahmed Khalil of the United Arab Emirates share the Toyota Top Goalscorer award after they scored more goals than any other player in the third round of Asian qualifiers on the Road to Russia.

The award takes into account the goals scored between Matchday One and Matchday Ten, with the quartet netting an average of once every two games during their sides' respective bids to reach the FIFA World Cup.

Australia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were all paired in Group B and three of the four players got off to scoring starts.

Khalil posted the most impressive Matchday One, scoring a brace – including a match-

winning penalty – in a 2-1 victory in Japan. Juric, meanwhile, netted the second in a 2-0 win over Iraq, while Al Abed's late penalty proved the difference as Saudi Arabia saw off Thailand 1-0.

Two more Al Abed penalties for the Saudis five days later claimed a come-from-behind 2-1 win over Iraq, whose goal was scored by Abdulraheem, before Khalil and Juric both netted against Thailand and Saudi Arabia respectively on Matchday Three.

One of the performances of the qualifiers saw Abdulraheem bag four as Iraq brushed aside Thailand 4-0 on Matchday Four to take the striker's tally to five, while Al Abed struck in a 3-0 win over the UAE.

Khalil scored his fourth of the campaign in a 2-0 Matchday Five victory over Iraq as the UAE looked in a strong position to progress at the midway stage, before the quartet failed

to find the back of the net in the ensuing two rounds of fixtures.

Australia's form had picked up by Matchday Eight as Juric bagged a brace in a 3-2 victory over Saudi Arabia, and Khalil's winner then ensured back-to-back defeats for the Saudis after the UAE posted a 2-1 win on Matchday Nine in a game that saw Al Abed score his fourth penalty of the group stage.

The trio of Abdulraheem, Al Abed and Khalil led the way in the scoring charts with five goals going into the final Matchday, when Juric drew level with them after scoring once in a 2-1 victory over Thailand that secured a play-off date with Syria.

Al Abed will appear at next summer's FIFA World Cup after the Green Falcons' 1-0 win over Japan secured second place but, despite Khalil and Abdulraheem's best efforts, both the UAE and Iraq missed out.



Line-up Confirmed For 2018 AFC U-23 Championship

JAPAN AND IRAQ ARE AMONG THE 15 TEAMS THAT WILL JOIN HOSTS CHINA AT NEXT YEAR'S AFC U-23 CHAMPIONSHIP AFTER THE LINE-UP WAS DECIDED FOLLOWING THE CONCLUSION OF JULY'S QUALIFYING TOURNAMENT.

Holders Japan and former winners Iraq are among 15 teams that booked their passage to January's AFC U-23 Championship in China after the qualifying round was held across the continent in July.

Despite an automatic place as hosts, China were part of the qualifying process and topped Group J in Phnom Penh after a 2-1 victory over Japan, who advanced as one of the best-placed runners-up, while Cambodia and the Philippines were eliminated.

Inaugural winners Iraq won three from three to win Group B in Riyadh, while hosts Saudi Arabia's victories over Bahrain and Afghanistan saw them join the Iraqis in advancing.

Runners-up in 2016, Korea Republic pipped Vietnam to first place in Group I following a 2-1

win in Ho Chi Minh City, but the Vietnamese also progressed after seeing off both Macau and Timor-Leste.

There was a shock in the three-team Group A as Oman got the better of the Islamic Republic of Iran in a 2-0 win in Bishkek to take the qualification spot after both teams had beaten hosts Kyrgyz Republic.

The West Asians proved too strong in Group C as hosts Qatar claimed top spot and Syria second to both progress at the expense of India and Turkmenistan.

Group D went down to the wire in Al Ain but in the end it was Uzbekistan that prevailed after a 2-0 victory over the United Arab Emirates eliminated the hosts, while Lebanon and Nepal also missed out.

Palestine's 3-2 victory over Jordan in Hebron ultimately saw the hosts take top spot in Group E, but the Jordanians defeated both

Tajikistan and Bangladesh and the two wins proved enough to also advance.

In Group F there were few problems for Australia, who claimed three wins from three, but victories over Brunei Darussalam and Singapore was not enough for hosts Myanmar to join the young Socceroos.

DPR Korea took top spot in Group G in Pyongyang after drawing with Hong Kong and defeating Laos and Chinese Taipei as the three other sides exited.

Finally, Malaysia finished top in Group H despite losing 3-0 to hosts Thailand in Bangkok as wins over Indonesia and Mongolia saw them finish above the Thais, who also progressed.

The competition will be held between January 9 and January 23 in the Chinese cities of Changshu, Kunshan, Jiangyin and Changzhou.

RISING SON

AFTER A RECORD-BREAKING 2016-17 SEASON IN ENGLAND'S PREMIER LEAGUE, ASIA'S MOST EXPENSIVE PLAYER SON HEUNG-MIN HELPED KOREA REPUBLIC QUALIFY FOR THEIR NINTH SUCCESSIVE FIFA WORLD CUP. HE HAS NOW SET HIS SIGHTS ON BECOMING A HERO FOR THE EAST ASIAN NATION.

By: Peter Alsop Photos: Lagardère Sports/Getty Images





Around 40 minutes' drive from the hustle and bustle of downtown Seoul lies Paju National Football Center, a modest training complex situated amid tranquil, leafy surroundings where Korea Republic undergo their preparations for home games.

Adjacent to the main pitch, the players congregate inside a building which, at first glance, doesn't appear particularly striking. However, its most significant feature – a wall decked out with team photos of the Taeguk Warriors sides that have qualified for the FIFA World Cup over the years – offers a strong reminder to the current generation of what is expected of them.

Korea Republic have appeared at nine tournaments in total, the first being in 1954, and have advanced to every one since 1986. It is an impressive record that is unrivalled in Asia.

Cha Bum-kun, Hong Myung-bo and Park Ji-sung are just three of the legends that appear in the various team lineups, the latter two being part of the most successful Korea Republic side ever after reaching the World Cup semi-finals on home soil in 2002. It is they who the current team would so dearly like to emulate.

The most recent picture, from 2014, features the nation's biggest hope, Son Heung-min, who, at 21, was the youngest player in the Korea

Republic squad in Brazil. Then at Germany's Bayer Leverkusen, the forward played in all three of his country's games, scoring against Algeria, but the East Asians were eliminated after picking up just a solitary point.

"IN 2014, I WAS THE YOUNGEST PLAYER AND I ALREADY HAD EXPERIENCE BEFORE THE WORLD CUP BY PLAYING IN THE [UEFA] CHAMPIONS LEAGUE. SO I THINK IT WAS VERY IMPORTANT FOR ME TO PLAY IN EUROPE."

In truth, it was a disappointing World Cup given that four years earlier, in South Africa, the national side had reached the knockout stage for the first time outside their own country.

But for Son, who had left his homeland to join Hamburg's youth academy at just 16 years of age in 2008, it was another huge step in his development after having already appeared in the UEFA Champions League earlier in the season.

"I think [the benefits of moving abroad at a young age] is a very important issue," said Son, sat in front of the 'Wall of Fame' following a training session ahead of August's FIFA World Cup qualifier with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

"In 2014, I was the youngest player and I already had experience before the World Cup by playing in the [UEFA] Champions League. So I think it was very important for me to play in Europe and learn before the big competitions.

"Playing in leagues such as the English Premier League, the German Bundesliga or Ligue 1 in France can give you good experience for these tournaments."

Experience is something Son already has in abundance, after leaving all he knew behind and heading to Europe in his teenage years. At 19, he was named in Korea Republic's squad for the 2011 AFC Asian Cup in Qatar, where he scored his first goal for the East Asians in a 4-1 group stage win over India.

The Taeguk Warriors would ultimately lose on penalties to eventual winners Japan in the semi-finals, but for Son it was the start of an international career that has already yielded nearly 60 caps and 17 goals.

Impressive performances after breaking into the Hamburg first team as a teenager, meanwhile, convinced Bayer Leverkusen to break their transfer record in 2013 by luring the forward to western Germany.

Son helped his new side reach the UEFA Champions League knockout phase in consecutive seasons, scoring in wins over Benfica and Zenit Saint Petersburg in 2014, as the Chuncheon native fitted seamlessly into

the Leverkusen lineup.

Heartbreak for the national team followed at the beginning of 2015 when, after the forward scored an injury-time equaliser against hosts Australia in the AFC Asian Cup final, the Socceroos ran out 2-1 winners in extra-time to mean Korea Republic's long wait for the continental title – which stretches back to 1960 – continued.

His performances did, however, gain recognition as he was named the 2015 AFC Asian International Player of the Year.

Son's growing reputation had also attracted the attention of Tottenham Hotspur who, already boasting a side brimming with young talent, parted with 30 million euros to bring him to north London in the summer of 2015.

Now 23, Son became the second Korean to represent Spurs – after Lee Young-pyo – but, more significantly, he had just been made the most expensive Asian player in history. With the global spotlight now on the forward more than ever, would the pressure of the price tag affect him like it had so many that had gone before?

"No, no, [the pressure] is something I enjoy," insisted Son.

"You maybe change [teams] two or three times in your career so it's good to have a record like this. I can tell people in 20 or 30 years' time that I moved from Bayer Leverkusen to Tottenham for 30 million euros – I can say this once I've finished my career.

Top Left FIFA World Cup 2014; AFC Asian Cup 2015

Above FIFA World Cup 2018 qualifiers

Bottom Left Tottenham Hotspur 2016-17

"I CAN ADMIT THAT I WAS PROUD OF MYSELF BECAUSE TO MAKE HISTORY IS NOT AN EASY THING TO DO. IT WAS ALWAYS MY DREAM TO GET MORE GOALS [THAN CHA]."

"I played in Germany for a long time, five years professionally, so I think the timing of the move to Tottenham was fantastic and I think I have made big steps forward."

The faster pace of life in the English Premier League offered Son new challenges, while the Korean international also had injuries to contend with during a first season in which, although far from disappointing, he was unable to produce his best form.

"There are many differences," he admitted. "In England it's more physical and the teams play much more attacking football.

"It's quicker, whereas in Germany it's more tactical and it's not like every attack has to end in a goal, sometimes you can wait and just keep possession.

"In the first year I didn't show my best performances because of the injury, but in the second year I showed how good I am and how

much I enjoy the Premier League."

That is no understatement. Often deployed in an exciting attacking quartet that included Harry Kane, Dele Alli and Christian Eriksen, Son excelled in a team that finished as runners-up in the league. On a personal level, records continued to tumble.

In September 2016, the forward became the first Asian to win the Premier League's Player of the Month award, before claiming it again in April to become the only player to take the prize more than once in the 2016-17 campaign.

Perhaps more significantly, though, was the fact that Son managed to break Cha Bum-kun's 31-year record of the most goals scored by a Korean player in a European top-flight league in a single season.

Arguably Korea Republic's greatest-ever player, Cha netted 19 times for Bayer Leverkusen in the 1985-86 season, but Son was to exceed that total by finishing on 21 goals in all competitions.

"I was a bit nervous when I was on 19 goals, the same number as Cha Bum-kun, because I wanted to break the record," admitted Son.

"Then as soon as I scored the two goals against Leicester it was a big relief and I was really, really happy because this was more than 30 years ago.

"I can admit that I was proud of myself



because to make history is not an easy thing to do. It was always my dream to get more goals [than Cha] and every season I want to have a better season than my last one.”

It took just a few weeks of the current campaign for Son to get off the mark once more, when he scored the opener in Tottenham’s 3-1 UEFA Champions League victory over German giants Borussia Dortmund.

Lavish off-season spending by other teams in the English league is expected to see the country’s richest clubs put in a strong challenge for the title this year, while Spurs also must contend with adapting to a temporary new home, Wembley Stadium, while work on their new ground is being completed.

But, although the current campaign promises to be even tougher than Son’s first two in London, the forward remains upbeat about the team’s prospects.

“It’s a great team, we’re young and everyone is hungry,” said the forward.

“Everyone has good quality and I enjoy going to training with them every day. I learn things from them and they learn things from me.

“Last season the team was really great. We came so close to winning the title. I enjoyed it as well, every game we went on the pitch to show how good we are and how good I am. I enjoyed last season very much.

“This makes me really happy and this is what I wanted when I moved to Tottenham. I wanted to make one or two more big steps and I’m on the way to making them.”

Back on the international scene, there is only one man the Korea Republic fans will look towards to fire them beyond the group stage for a third time come the end of the season, after, with some difficulty, the Taeguk Warriors secured a ninth successive appearance at the tournament.

After enduring an inconsistent qualifying campaign, German coach Uli Stielike was

Left & Above
FIFA World Cup 2018 qualifiers

“WE ARE HAPPY BECAUSE WE HAVE QUALIFIED BUT NOW WE MUST LOOK FORWARD. NEXT YEAR IS VERY IMPORTANT, IT IS THE WORLD CUP.”

relieved of his duties and replaced by former Korean international Shin Tae-yong for their final two matches.

The East Asians would draw their penultimate game with Iran to leave their qualification hopes hanging in the balance ahead of their final-day meeting with Uzbekistan in Tashkent, where only a win would guarantee progression.

Son struck the post in the first half of a game that saw the Koreans hit the woodwork three times before it ultimately also finished goalless. However, with Syria playing out a 2-2 draw in Iran, the point was enough to see Korea join the Iranians, Japan and Saudi Arabia as the four confirmed Asian teams for Russia next year.

“Qualifying nine times in a row can give us confidence because that is not an easy thing to do,” reflected Son after the game in Tashkent.

“We are happy because we have qualified but now we must look forward. Next year is very important, it is the World Cup so we have to work really hard with the new manager to see what happens.”

Despite playing his entire senior career outside his native Korea Republic, it is clear home is where the heart is for Son, and the ambition to drive the team forward over the coming months is evident.

It was more relief than joy etched on his face following the point in Uzbekistan and there is little doubt there is plenty work to be done ahead of the FIFA World Cup.

Not least will be rectifying a poor away record that saw three defeats and two draws from five games over a campaign in which progression was almost entirely down to a near perfect home record.

“I think we maybe feel the pressure more when we go away from home and we don’t play with the same confidence,” explained Son, who missed the away defeat to China and the scoreless stalemate with Syria in Malaysia.

“Maybe we’re a bit scared, we try but we’re not at 100 percent.”

Unfazed by being the most expensive Asian player in history and with a record-breaking season already behind him, fear is not a word that can be used to describe Son.

Indeed, having achieved so much by such a young age, it is hardly surprising that he sets the bar high when it comes to his personal aims with the national team.

“I want to be a hero in South Korea, of course this is my dream,” admitted Son.

“I want to be known as someone who helps his teammates, the game-changer. I hope I can make big steps and I’m looking forward to a positive future.

“It’s not easy leaving South Korea at 16 to go to Germany. Of course, I’m still young and I want to learn more – every game, every day. This is my goal and I want to see where I can get to when I’m 27, 30, 35.”

Son and his teammates, rightly, cannot yet be compared to the ‘Class of 2002’, but – due to the globalisation of the game – they already boast far more worldly experience than the World Cup squad from 15 years ago.

And should they find the right balance in time for Russia next summer, Son may well hear his name mentioned in the same breath as the legends that evoke so many fond memories in Korean football – and realise his dream of becoming a hero in his homeland.



PRIDE OF THAILAND

CHANATHIP SONGKRASIN HAS LED THE WAY FOR THAI FOOTBALL THIS YEAR. THE MIDFIELD MAESTRO DAZZLED ASIA IN THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS AND IN THE 2017 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE WITH MUANGTHONG UNITED. AND A NEW ADVENTURE IN JAPAN IS THE LATEST CHAPTER IN THIS RISING STAR'S STORY.

By: Daniel Pordes Photos: Lagardère Sports/@2017Consadole





It's fair to say that with just three months of the year remaining Chanathip Songkrasin has already had a 2017 to remember.

The midfielder, who turned 24 on October 5, began the New Year eager to participate in his maiden AFC Champions League group stage and will conclude it having played in his first J. League season following a loan from club Muangthong United.

"This year has been a dream for me," says Chanathip, whose diminutive stature is dwarfed by the leather couch he is engulfed by at the Kawasaki City-based hotel ahead of Hokkaido Consadole Sapporo's match with Kawasaki Frontale.

"I always had a dream that one day I would be able to play in the J.League, and it is also the dream of many players, including myself, to get to play in the AFC Champions League against the top teams in Asia.

"So, I guess we can say that – sitting here today – I have achieved those dreams."

Chanathip's star had already begun to rise five years earlier in 2012 when he debuted in the Thai Premier League for BEC Tero Sasana. Such was his impact that by the 2013 season, Japanese clubs including Gamba Osaka and Shimizu S-Pulse were already courting the youngster.

Indeed, Chanathip had a 10-day trial with Shimizu but nothing came of it.

"I don't know what happened. I wasn't given a chance to train with the first team; maybe I just needed to improve more," he says. "I wanted to sign with them but the offer didn't come."

Nevertheless, his 2013 concluded with a happy ending after he was named Thai Premier League Young Player of the Year.

Two more seasons honing his craft with BEC Tero Sasana followed before a move to Thai giants Muangthong United and a first chance to enter Asia's premium club tournament, the AFC Champions League.

Unfortunately for Chanathip and Muangthong, the Thai club faced Chinese heavyweights Shanghai SIPG at the final hurdle in the play-offs and the likes of Elkeson, Dario Conca and Wu Lei proved too difficult an obstacle in a 3-0 elimination.

"Last year the team was completely new," recalls Chanathip.

"The coach was new; the players were new and the tactics were new. We weren't yet able to adapt to the new tactics and didn't play well in the early stages.

"We might not have performed as we wanted against Shanghai SIPG, but that was just the beginning for this team."

A year later and a year stronger,

Muangthong returned to the continental club competition, this time qualifying directly for the 2017 group stage.

Drawn alongside Japanese champions Kashima Antlers, who were coming off a 2016 FIFA World Club runners-up finish to Real Madrid, 2012 winners Ulsan Hyundai and Australia's Brisbane Roar, it looked a tough test for a side that had picked up just a single point in their only previous AFC Champions League outing in 2013.

"Ahead of the AFC Champions League, I was very excited. I believed it was a good opportunity to face Asia's best," says Chanathip.

"My first personal target was simply to improve myself to reach the next level as a player and my second one was to put on good performances. With Muangthong, we were aiming to reach at least the knockout stages."

A prediction that proved to be correct as the Thai side picked up 11 points from their six Group E games to reach the Round of 16. A run of results that was based on impressive home form as Muangthong enjoyed a perfect record in front of their own fans.

A 2-1 win over Kashima Antlers was particularly memorable after striker Xisco scored an injury-time winner but the 3-0 victory over Brisbane Roar on Matchday Five

was especially sweet for Chanathip after he scored a spectacular goal.

Collecting the ball midway through the Brisbane half, the midfielder showed superb acceleration to motor past one opponent before stepping inside a sliding challenge from another.

One on one with goalkeeper Tomislav Bilic, Chanathip shuffled and shimmied before rounding the custodian to tap into an empty net to the acclaim of the Muangthong fans.

"For this goal, I wasn't so confident with my shooting at the time," he admits.

"I thought to myself if I were to take the ball with me, I would have a better chance of scoring a goal."

While the fans celebrated, up went Chanathip's fingers on both hands to form a rectangle. Telling people to take a picture of the moment? Not quite.

"Actually, the idea for this celebration came from my comic book 'Fantasista', it's just a reference to that," explains Chanathip.

"I am actually crazy about comics and it's not every day I can do a celebration like this, as I don't score that many goals!"

Fantasista is a sports manga series by Michiteru Kusaba whose protagonist, a countryside boy called Teppei Sakamoto, aims to become a successful football player in Japan and compete in the World Cup. It is

Left
AFC Champions League 2017

Above
With Consadole Sapporo in the J.League

a comic that also includes Samurai Blue icon Keisuke Honda amongst its fans.

And so for Chanathip, who was born in the Thai country district of Sam Phran, his belated move to Japan this summer and club Consadole Sapporo could have been seen as life imitating art, or at least a comic book fan following a strand of his favourite character's journey.

"I had been playing in Thailand for quite a while by this point and I had already achieved what I'd set out to do there, having already won the Thai Premier League (in 2016)," he says.

"I wanted to show the whole of Asia that Thai players can play in the very best Asian leagues. There were other teams interested but Consadole made it clear they were the most serious in bringing me over.

"I also liked that they had the initials 'CS' [Consadole Sapporo] the same as my name!"

Since his summer move, Chanathip has impressed in the Consadole shirt although the team's results have been mixed so far with the club hovering just above the relegation places.

And the experience of a new challenge and

a new footballing adventure – both on and off the field – has been one that the Thai has fully embraced.

"Of course, the level of competition here is much tougher than Thailand," he says. "As well as adapting to the new team and establishing my style of play here. But I'm very happy getting a chance to play.

"I didn't find adapting to Japan that difficult, maybe because both Thailand and Japan are not far apart. Initially, I thought it would be tough as I've never played abroad, so I was afraid of people looking down on me and not accepting me as a player.

"However, since I have settled down the coaches, staff and teammates have all treated me like a family member which has helped me greatly. I really enjoy living in Sapporo. It is such a peaceful town with fresh air and friendly people.

"In my spare time after training, I have my camera snapping photos, reading my comic books and watching movies – these things make me happy. Apart from that I spend my time having coffee in cafes and learning Japanese."

For Chanathip, the time in Japan is important not just for his own sake but also as a representative of his nation. A positive impression left upon the J.League and the fans by the young star could open the



doorway to more of his countrymen getting a similar opportunity.

He is not the first Southeast Asian player to attempt this. Vietnam's Le Cong Vinh, Indonesia's Irfan Bachdim and Cambodia's Chan Vathanaka are among the names who have endured mixed spells in Japan.

"Actually, I have no concern about those who have come before me," insists Chanathip.

"I'm very happy getting the chance to play in the J.League and did not pay much attention to the history of other ASEAN players in the past. I'm here to achieve my dream, because I want to be here and to make the Thai people proud.

"Of course the main goal is to help the club realise their objectives – such as avoiding relegation – but another target here is to be successful so that other Thai players will have the chance to prove themselves here in the J.League, which will in turn improve our abilities," he says.

"If I can show the fans and clubs here how well Thai players can do then hopefully that will pave the way for more footballers from Thailand to come over here.

"In a way, I'm here representing the Thai people as well as my country, in the same way as I do when playing for the national team."

*All
FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 Qualifiers*

When it comes to the Thailand side, Chanathip has often stood out in the War Elephants' FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign and forced many previously uninformed football pundits to sit up and take



notice of the silky skills of the petite playmaker.

Just two points from their 10 games in Group B by no means tells the full tale with Chanathip and his compatriots enduring a large helping of misfortune in several games, and only losing by a single goal in several of the encounters with Asia's best sides.

"It's been a long time since the Thailand

team has played in the final stage of the World Cup qualifiers and it's not easy for us but in all the matches we had a chance to win – which is a positive sign," says Chanathip, a two-time AFF Championship winner (2014, 2016) with the national team.

"Of course, the results haven't been great, but it's been a good experience for the team to take the next step and play against the best sides in Asia.

"I have had the opportunity to play against some of the best players I've ever faced in my career so far including stars like Takuma Asano, Omar Abdulrahman and Shinji Kagawa."

Although he won't be appearing at the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, Chanathip still hopes to make the dreams of his favourite footballing cartoon a reality. But it is another of the game's superheroes he is most commonly associated with in his homeland, Argentina's Lionel Messi, given the nickname "Messi Jay".

"There are many players I try to look up to: Maradona, Zidane, Berbatov, former Brazil strikers Ronaldo and Ronaldinho," he adds.

"And of course, I am proud that people call me 'Messi', but obviously I'm not Messi.

"I am not anyone else. Chanathip is Chanathip. I'm a representative of my country and I play to make the Thai people proud."

NEW BLUE

INDIA'S NUMBER ONE GURPREET SINGH RETURNED TO HIS HOMELAND AFTER THREE YEARS IN NORWAY. A BUSY FEW MONTHS AWAIT, AS THE PUNJAB NATIVE AIMS FOR AFC CUP GLORY WITH NEW SIDE JSW BENGALURU AND AFC ASIAN CUP QUALIFICATION WITH THE NATIONAL TEAM.

By: Peter Alsop Photo: Lagardère Sports

Two-time I-League and Federation Cup champions and 2016 AFC Cup runners-up JSW Bengaluru's rapid rise in just over four years of existence has been remarkable.

Yet, after advancing to the AFC Cup knockout rounds for the third successive year in May, the side from Karnataka were dealt arguably their biggest challenge to date when many of the team that had been involved in their success departed for pastures new.

In came a host of foreign players ahead of the start of the Indian Super League, while captain and Indian icon Sunil Chhetri remained.

But, amid a chaotic period of comings and goings, one signing in particular grabbed the attention: the arrival of India's number one goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh, who was acquired from Norwegian side Stabaek following a meeting in Abu Dhabi just hours before the transfer deadline.

It was a major coup, the homecoming of a man who had broken new ground outside the South Asian country. Singh is only the fifth Indian to play professionally in Europe and the first to play a top-flight competitive match, while he is also the sole person from his country to appear in the UEFA Europa League.

Ironically, however, it was Asia's equivalent of the Europa League, the AFC Cup, that was among the main reasons for the custodian to return to India after his three-year stint in Scandinavia.

The tournament, coupled with India's increasing chances of progressing to the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019, convinced the big shot-stopper that the time was right to make the move.

"I saw a very good opportunity with Bengaluru as it's one of the very best and most professional clubs in India," said 25-year-old Singh ahead of his competitive debut against DPR Korea's 4.25 SC.

"The way they approached me was very professional and they were the only Indian

club who wanted to pay a transfer fee for me, so that shows the commitment of the club.

"Most importantly, they are playing in the AFC Cup and the level in these games is different from what you play in India. I wanted to be part of it because it's challenging."

Singh would go on to keep a clean sheet against 4.25 as the AFC Cup South Asia Zonal champions claimed a 3-0 victory in the first leg of the Inter-Zone semi-finals.

The game was far from straightforward, though, as torrential rain made for tricky conditions but Bengaluru's new goalkeeper performed admirably, collecting two deep crosses late on in a valuable home shutout.

Three weeks later in Pyongyang, Singh dived to his right to save a second-half penalty as Bengaluru held the hosts to a scoreless draw to advance to an AFC Cup Inter-Zone final with Tajikistan's FC Istiklol and leave the side just two games away from a return to the final.

"I think [last year] Bengaluru set an example to other Indian clubs by reaching the final, so I have no doubt that we can go all the way," added Singh.

"I hope we keep working hard, keep our heads down and try to achieve what hasn't been achieved yet."

After starting his career with Kolkata-based East Bengal, Singh was selected for India's 2011 AFC Asian Cup squad in Qatar at the age of just 18.

Although he didn't appear at the continental competition, the custodian made his India debut against Turkmenistan later that year, before signing for Stabaek in August 2014.

Undoubtedly a huge step out of his comfort zone, Singh would go on to adapt well to life in chillier climes.

A Norwegian league debut eventually arrived in May 2016 before a month later he again made history by playing in the UEFA Europa League against Welsh side Connah's Quay Nomads, when, unfortunately, he was forced off with a

hand injury.

"Luckily it was summer when I first went to Norway, so I initially adjusted [to the weather] in stages," admitted Singh.

"But I had never experienced snowfall before so training in it was a completely different experience. Your fingers and toes go numb and if you ever get hit in the face with the ball it's painful.

"It's something I can always say to people that I've experienced; I don't think any other Indian player has done that. But the Norwegian summer is better.

"It was a very nice experience and made me learn a lot about life, made me more independent and responsible, so I have no regrets."

With the national team, meanwhile, Singh has appeared in all three games of the Blue Tigers' perfect start to their AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 qualifying campaign, keeping clean sheets in wins over Myanmar, the Kyrgyz Republic and Macau.

Four more points will guarantee progression to Asia's premier competition for the fourth time, after also appearing in 1964, 1984 and 2011.

Defeat to Guam in June 2015 – ironically, the game before Singh was installed as his country's number one – marked the low point for India's national team in the early stages of the 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifying stages.

But since then the team has recovered to perform admirably in the ensuing AFC Asian Cup qualifiers and now seem set to take their place among the continent's elite in early 2019.

"India has seen hard times and that is something that we learn from because when you lose games you know the value of winning," explained Singh.

"The boys we have now are a new and hungry bunch who want to learn, believe in the system we have and will give it some time.

"After two or three years, finally we have something that we can build on. I'm happy to be part of this team and we want to get as many points as we can to make sure we get to the UAE."





JEWEL IN THE CROWN

TEN YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE URAWA RED DIAMONDS WERE CROWNED KINGS OF ASIA AFTER THE MOST GLORIOUS NIGHT IN THEIR HISTORY. WITH THE 2007 CHAMPIONS DEEP INTO THE COMPETITION ONCE MORE, YUICHIRO NAGAI, THE MVP A DECADE AGO, LOOKS BACK ON HIS SIDE'S REMARKABLE RUN.

By: Sean Carroll Photos: Lagardère Sports





The roar from the 59,034-strong massed sea of red was deafening as the teams climbed the 14 steps to the Saitama Stadium pitch, but AFC Champions League MVPs are made of stern stuff and amidst the din Yuichiro Nagai was perfectly at peace.

Urawa Red Diamonds' No.9 not only knew what he had to do, but he was certain he was about to do it.

Nagai had fluffed his lines a fortnight previously as Urawa drew 1-1 with Sepahan away in Fuladshahr, but tonight the then 28-year-old was convinced he was about to make a telling contribution as Urawa became the first Japanese side to win the AFC Champions League – and he the first player from Japan to be named as MVP.

"The day before when I went to bed I had a really clear image that I'd be able to score a goal," he recounts a decade on from that historic night.

"In the first leg I'd hit the post and after reflecting on that I remember feeling really clearly as we came out for the second leg that I could score in this game. That confidence was a real plus."

It was confidence that had built gradually over the previous nine months, as Urawa

progressed steadily and determinedly towards the ultimate prize.

This was their first foray into Asia's premier competition, and Nagai remembers being pleasantly surprised during their opening match in Group E.



"First of all we played at home against the Indonesian side Persik Kediri, and if I'm honest at that time I didn't think the opposition were especially strong. I wouldn't go as far as to say it was easy, but there was a feeling that we were able to win."

Urawa did indeed emerge with a 3-0 victory from that game before picking up a solid point away to Sydney FC in their next outing, drawing 2-2 in Australia. Nagai also found his feet – and the net – quickly, registering in both matches.

They then edged Shanghai Shenhua 1-0 at home and drew 0-0 in China to move top of the group after four games, but such plain sailing didn't continue for long, with the reverse fixture against Persik providing the Reds with an important lesson in the difficulties of continental competition.

"When we went to play them away the pitch was really bad. There were wet patches here and there and we weren't used to playing in those kind of conditions, which meant we were unable to show our technique and had to play in the air a lot.

"The opponents, on the other hand, were far livelier than they had been at our place and were connecting their passes without paying any mind to the surface. That was kind of surprising for me – the true nature of playing away from home outside Japan."

Even in those trying conditions Urawa managed to pick up a 3-3 draw, and after that trip to East Java, Holger Osieck's side reverted to more dependable form in their final game, playing out a 0-0 at home to Sydney FC that saw both sides through to the knockout stage.

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors lay in wait in the quarter-finals, and despite conceding a late away goal in the first leg Urawa took a 2-1 lead to Korea Republic, where Nagai and his teammates were offered another glimpse of football's rich tapestry of experiences and emotions.

"FOR ME PERSONALLY, I'VE CONTINUED TO PLAY IN THE DECADE SINCE WE WON THE ACL, BUT THAT WAS TRULY THE GREATEST MOMENT."

"There wasn't really such a feeling of being 'away' in South Korea, but I remember in that game the opponent got a player sent off and then they were getting more and more frustrated and getting stuck into us. Us Reds players kept saying we weren't going to lose our heads or be provoked though, we just withstood it and made sure we didn't react.

"At the start of the game the whole stadium

All
AFC Champions League 2007

was really hostile against us as the Japanese opponent, but bit by bit they came round to support us on account of the fact we weren't reacting while Jeonbuk continued to play roughly. They were even applauding our play and so on, which made me think about the way in which football can change people and how the atmosphere in the stadium had altered. It really has that power and that is a really interesting memory for me."

Urawa came through that rough-and-ready encounter with a 2-0 win, setting up a semi-final against another Korean opponent in Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma.

"I think they were the strongest team we faced. We drew 2-2 away, and [Robson] Ponte scored. The first game was away from home and so we knew it would be tight and that a draw was okay."

Nagai may have gone on to be named player of the tournament – the first of only two Japanese players to receive the honour (Gamba Osaka's Yasuhito Endo picked up the gong in 2008) – but is bashful about his individual accolade, insisting modestly that he couldn't have earned the plaudits without his teammates and instead singling out the side's Brazilian play-maker as their standout

performer.

"Of course everyone played a key role, but the fact Ponte always seemed to pop up with a crucial goal in tight games was huge for us."

"IT SEEMS LIKE A STORY FROM A LONG TIME AGO NOW," NAGAI CONCLUDES OF THE NIGHT HE REACHED THE TOP.

In games when it seemed like we couldn't find a way through and the opponents were defending solidly Ponte would manage to beat his man and make the chance for a goal. That was very big for us. Ponte's presence was huge."

He wasn't afraid to step up to the plate in the second leg either, and after another 2-2 draw Ponte was the first to place the ball on the spot in the penalty shootout, dispatching his effort with aplomb to get Urawa up and running.

"There were nerves but we did it in front of the Reds fans and they were sensational," Nagai remembers of the shootout. "When the opposition were taking their penalties they were constantly waving their flags in order to prevent them from concentrating and then when we took ours they fell completely silent."



There were some nerves in that atmosphere but it was enjoyable.”

So enjoyable that not a single Reds player, Nagai included, failed from 12 yards, and with Choi Sung-kuk seeing his effort saved by Ryota Tsuzuki, Urawa’s place in the final was confirmed.

By that point the desire to become champions – and the belief they could do it – was far outweighing any pressure the players felt, and Ponte was again on the score-sheet in the first leg of the final against Sepahan, notching in a 1-1 draw.

“We’d made it that far and so had a really strong feeling of wanting to become champions,” Nagai recalls.

“That time, too, the first game was away and we strongly believed that as long as we didn’t suffer a really bad defeat there that we wouldn’t lose at home. It would have been great to have won, but we knew we could do it at home so 1-1 was fine.”

And so to Urawa’s patch. The 14th of November, 2007. Nagai had entered the pitch firmly believing he would score, and midway through the first half his chance came.

Ponte – who else? – sent a ball in behind, and having beaten the offside trap Nagai found himself bearing down on Abbas Mohammadi’s goal.

“Ponte’s pass took a deflection on the way

*All
AFC Champions League 2007*

through which changed its course a little and threw off the opponent, and because I had that confidence of being able to score I wasn’t at all flustered and just hit it.”

Things went just as he’d imagined, and the shot rifled into the back of the net, provoking jubilant scenes as Saitama Stadium erupted.

“At the time there was of course the explosion of happiness at having scored a

“THERE AREN’T MANY GAMES THAT BRING WITH THEM THAT AMOUNT OF PRESSURE SO IT ENABLED ME TO PLAY BIG GAMES AFTERWARDS IN A MORE RELAXED MANNER.”

goal but it wasn’t really any more joyous than goals I’d scored before,” Nagai explains of his euphoric celebration, during which he tore behind the goal to bask in the cheers of the home fans.

“Of course there was happiness but I wanted to capitalise on the fact we were at home and to create even more delight – to ensure the atmosphere in the stadium was even more in our favour – so I celebrated with

slightly more joy than was actually needed.”

Harnessing the voltage of their home fans had been key for Urawa throughout the campaign, and the players knew they had to match the intensity of their supporters once they crossed the white line.

“Within that atmosphere at Saitama Stadium as an Urawa player there was a real feeling of not being allowed to lose,” Nagai said. “The supporters were behind us so strongly as a unit that we felt we had to provide them with joy – there was a real sense of duty in that respect.”

And the players held up their end of the bargain – and ultimately the AFC Champions League trophy – as Yuki Abe added a second goal in the 71st minute to wrap up a 3-1 aggregate win to crown Nagai and Urawa as kings of Asia.



THE MAIN MAN

AFTER A STUNNING 2016 AFC CUP CAMPAIGN SAW HAMMADI AHMED FINISH AS MVP AND TOP GOALSCORER,

THE AIR FORCE CLUB FORWARD IS AIMING FOR CONTINENTAL GLORY ONCE AGAIN AS THE DEFENDING CHAMPIONS PREPARE TO PLAY IN THE FINAL FOR A SECOND SUCCESSIVE YEAR.

By: Ahmed Hashim Photos: Lagardère Sports

It is not easy being your team's goalscoring talisman, but for Hammadi Ahmed, it is a challenge to relish. The 27-year-old Iraqi striker has spent seven years at defending AFC Cup champions Air Force Club. When Ahmed arrived in 2010 as a young talent, Air Force Club had not won any silverware for five years. Seven years on, Ahmed can look back to almost 100 goals and a period of significant success for him and the team. Ahmed's most memorable campaign came in 2016-17, when he showed his knack for scoring crucial goals in big matches. His tally

of 16 in Air Force Club's triumphant run to the AFC Cup title included the lone goal in the final against JSW Bengaluru. Ahmed then went on to score both goals in the 2-1 win over Al Hedood, which saw them crowned Iraqi champions for the first time since 2005. It was this form which earned him a nomination for the AFC Player of the Year award. Air Force Club are now back in the AFC Cup final this year after seeing off Syria's Al Wahda in the West Asia Zonal final and although he hasn't scored as much as he would like during this campaign, Ahmed remains confident in his abilities.





“My fans expect me to score every game. I am to blame for that; I got them used to that,” said Ahmed after his side’s dramatic 1-0 victory over Syria’s Al Wahda in the second leg of the AFC Cup West Asia Zonal final saw them advance on away goals after a 2-2 aggregate scoreline.

“But what’s important today is someone scores. What matters is that we have reached the final. Now that we have done that, hopefully I can score the winner in the final.”

The last six months have been a time of ups and downs for Ahmed, with an injury in April threatening to curtail his season. However, he recovered in time to lead Air Force Club to the Iraqi league title.

On the continental front, the forward was not able to repeat the kind of goalscoring form that he displayed in 2016, coming up with only two goals so far. Nonetheless, the timing of those goals showed why Ahmed is so important to his side.

“I know I haven’t been the same this season,” admitted Ahmed. “The injury affected me and yet I was able to score two crucial goals - against Al Hidd in the group stage and then against Al Wahda in the first leg of the Zonal final.”

For all of his success at the Baghdad club, Ahmed has his time at local club Samarra

to thank for bringing him into nationwide prominence. Starting off as a teenager, he scored 15 goals in two seasons before the giants came calling. It was an offer he couldn’t refuse.

Ahmed’s move to Air Force Club raised his profile and, seven years later, he is a club



legend at one of Iraqi football’s most historic institutions. The love story between club and player has also survived a number of offers from abroad.

“To be honest, I get offers from abroad every year. In the second year with Air Force Club, I got an offer from the Ukrainian club Metalist

Kharkiv,” said Ahmed.

“I rejected it as I preferred to stay here. I got offers from all over the Gulf region, Jordan and also Japan. Every single occasion, I decided to stay here. I was happy here and I had a good contract. I am the main man here and the fans love me. Everyone respects me.”

Such loyalty to the club has made Ahmed a beloved icon for the fans, who call him the ‘Villa of the Falcons’ due to his resemblance to the World Cup-winning Spanish striker. However, unlike the former Valencia and Barcelona frontman, Ahmed has not enjoyed similar success with his national team.

Unfortunately for him, his international career coincided with a lean phase for Iraq, who have been unable to match the heights of the mid-2000s when the Lions of Mesopotamia finished fourth at the 2004 Olympics and went on to win the 2007 AFC Asian Cup.

Yet, Ahmed does have some great memories to look back at when he recalls his stint with the national team, during which he scored six goals.

“After moving to Air Force Club, I earned my first national team call-up,” he reflected. “My first goal for Iraq is one of the most memorable goals of my career.”

The goal in question was an 86th-minute winner against Jordan that saved the Iraqis from elimination in the 2014 FIFA World Cup qualifiers.

Ahmed’s fierce left-footed strike from the edge of the box flew past Jordan keeper Amer Shafi and nestled in the top corner, sparking a shirt-ripping celebration from the overjoyed striker.

The striker was also involved in Iraq’s 2013 Gulf Cup campaign, where he scored twice to help the side to a runners-up finish behind the United Arab Emirates. This was followed by the disappointment of missing out on Iraq’s 2015 Asian Cup squad.

Despite making a return to the national team for the 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifiers, Ahmed subsequently announced his retirement from international football in June of this year after Iraq failed to qualify for the finals.

Although he wasn’t able to repeat his club heroics at international level, the forward remains hopeful when asked about the future of Iraqi football.

“Iraq is filled with lots of talent. We have had huge stars who wrote their names into history, who starred not just in Iraq but also earned a name abroad.

“We have a population that loves football. It’s the major sport in the country. We have

done great work, especially with our youth teams who have achieved great results recently.

“Similarly, I have great hope for our senior national team, who have started to regain form and have begun winning games again. I expect them to excel in the future as new blood comes in and every player looks to show his worth at international level.”

For now, Ahmed’s focus shifts to Air Force Club and the task at hand - retaining the AFC Cup title. It has not been as easy this year to reach the final, compared to the dominant form the Falcons showed in 2016.

“Last year, we became the first Iraqi side to win this tournament. I am proud of this achievement, as a player and especially as the captain of the team,” said Ahmed.

“We were a good side last year, stable and harmonious. We didn’t make any wholesale changes. Every player gelled well and we were prepared to go all the way.

“This season, we haven’t had much time to prepare before the Zonal final. We just had a 10-day camp prior to the Al Wahda

match. After we lost the first leg, I promised that we would go through. Thank God, we have delivered on that promise.”

Before signing off, Ahmed made a final remark on the individual records that was a highlight of his 2016 season.

“Even though the team’s achievements are our topmost priority, I think the individual records also help motivate us. I was able to become the AFC Cup top scorer, break various records and be named as the tournament MVP.

“I think this is a good thing; these things really push us and give us confidence and hopefully, we can retain the title. This is our objective.”



Left & Above Left
AFC Cup 2016

Bottom Left & Right
AFC Cup 2017

Above Right AFC
Cup 2017



Japan, Korea and Saudi Arabia set for Russia

Japan, Korea Republic and Saudi Arabia have joined the Islamic Republic of Iran to make up the four confirmed Asian teams at next summer’s FIFA World Cup after gaining the necessary results in the final two rounds of Asian qualifiers in August and September.

Australia, meanwhile, face a two-legged Inter-Continental Play-off with Honduras in November for a place in the competition after defeating Syria 3-2 on aggregate in the Continental Play-off following third-place finishes in their respective groups.

After Iran became the first Asian side to advance to Russia back in June, Japan earned their spot by winning Group B with a game to spare following a 2-0 victory over Australia at the end of August.

Takuma Asano opened the scoring as half-time approached and Yosuke Ideguchi struck late on as the result also guaranteed top spot in the standings after Saudi Arabia went down 2-1 to the United Arab Emirates following stunning goals from Ali Mabkhout and Ahmed Khalil.

Iraq continued their recent improvements under coach Basim Qasim as Saad Abdulameer’s penalty in the last 10 minutes wrapped up a 2-1 win over bottom side Thailand in Bangkok.

Five days later, the final Matchday was all about the second automatic qualifying spot in Group B as Australia and Saudi Arabia started the day on equal points but with the Saudis boasting a better goal difference.

Goals from Tomi Juric and Mathew Leckie saw the Socceroos post a 2-1 victory over Thailand to put the pressure on the West Asians ahead of the day’s later kick-off.

With Japan already assured of their place in Russia, the onus was on Saudi Arabia to attack

and, after a scoreless first half, it was substitute Fahad Al Muwallad who proved the hero. The Al Ittihad forward came off the bench to rifle home the only goal of the game and secure a first FIFA World Cup berth since 2006 as Australia finished in third. Elsewhere, Iraq claimed back-to-back wins for the only time in Group B as Aymen Hussein’s first-half goal was enough to see off the UAE, whose qualifying campaign had started positively



05/10/2017
Syria 1 (Omar Al Soma 85 pen) Australia 1 (Robbie Kruse 40)
10/10/2017
Australia 2 (Tim Cahill 13, 109) Syria 1 (Omar Al Soma 6)
Australia win 3-2 on aggregate after extra-time

but tailed off as their bid for a first FIFA World Cup appearance since debuting in 1990 proved unsuccessful. In Group A, Iran had already wrapped up first place but went into their penultimate game with Korea Republic having yet to lose or concede a goal. The Koreans, Uzbekistan and Syria, meanwhile, were all aiming to claim the second automatic qualification spot. More than 63,000 turned out at Seoul World Cup Stadium but witnessed the hosts draw a

blank as the Taeguk Warriors were unable to break down the Iranians and a goalless draw ensued. Uzbekistan, though, passed up the chance to leapfrog the East Asians after Gao Lin’s 85th-minute penalty saw China run out 1-0 winners in Wuhan. Syria were the major beneficiaries of the two results as Omar Khribin’s brace helped defeat Qatar 3-1 in a game that saw striker Omar Al Soma make his first appearance for the Qasioun Eagles since 2012. That meant Korea went into their final-day clash with Uzbekistan in Tashkent two points ahead of their opponents and Syria as the three teams continued their battle for the runners-up spot. The Koreans thrice hit the woodwork but were unable to break the deadlock as the game ended 0-0. Drama in Tehran saw Syria’s Tamer Haj Mohamed breach the Iranian defence for the first time in 10 Group A games to put the Syrians a goal to the good early on, before Sardar Azmoun’s brace put Iran 2-1 up. But, with Syria facing elimination, Al Soma struck three minutes into injury time to claim a 2-2 draw and third place in the standings as Korea advanced and the Uzbeks were eliminated. China continued their resurgence under Italian coach Marcello Lippi with a 2-1 victory over Qatar to mean the East Asians ultimately finished just a point behind Syria. Al Soma’s late penalty then cancelled out Robbie Kruse’s opener as the Qasioun Eagles and Australia drew the first leg of their Continental Play-off 1-1 in Melaka. But the Syrians’ remarkable run finally came to an end in Sydney as Tim Cahill’s brace – the second his 50th for his country – secured a 3-2 aggregate win after extra-time after Al Soma had put the visitors in front.



Group A									Group B										
	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts			P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts	
IR Iran	10	6	4	0	10	2	8	22	31/08/17	Korea Republic 0 IR Iran 0	Japan	10	6	2	2	17	7	10	20
Korea Republic	10	4	3	3	11	10	1	15	China 1-0 (Gao Lin 85, pen) Uzbekistan 0	Saudi Arabia	10	6	1	3	17	10	7	19	29/08/17
Syria	10	3	4	3	9	8	1	13	Syria 3 (Omar Khribin 7, 53; Mahmoud Al Mawas 90+4) Qatar 1 (Ali Asadalla 35)	Australia	10	5	4	1	16	11	5	19	United Arab Emirates 2 (Ali Mabkhout 21, Ahmed Khalil 60) Saudi Arabia 1 (Nawaf Al Abed 19)
Uzbekistan	10	4	1	5	6	7	-1	13	05/09/17	United Arab Emirates 10	4	1	5	10	13	-3	13	31/08/2017	
China	10	3	3	4	8	10	-2	12	Uzbekistan 0 Korea Republic 0	Iraq	10	3	2	5	11	12	-1	11	Japan 2 (Takuma Asano 41, Yosuke Ideguchi 82)
Qatar	10	2	1	7	8	15	-7	7	IR Iran 2 (Sardar Azmoun 45, 64) Syria 2 (Tamer Haj Mohamed 13, Omar Al Soma 90+3)	Thailand	10	0	2	8	6	24	-18	2	Australia 0
									Qatar 1 (Akram Afif 47) China 2 (Xiao Zhi 74, Wu Lei 83)									Thailand 1 (Ahmed Ibrahim 63 OG) Iraq 2 (Justin Meram 34, Saad Abdulameer 84 pen)	
																			05/09/2017
																			Australia 2 (Tomi Juric 69, Mathew Leckie 86)
																			Thailand 1 (Pokklaw Anan 82)
																			Iraq 1 (Aymen Hussein 29) United Arab Emirates 0
																			Saudi Arabia 1 (Fahad Al Muwallad 63) Japan 0



AFC Champions League Last Four Decided

A l Hilal, Persepolis, Shanghai SIPG and Urawa Red Diamonds will contest the semi-finals of the 2017 AFC Champions League after the four sides advanced from arguably the most exciting set of quarter-finals the competition has ever witnessed.

In the West, two-time Asian champions Al Hilal will face semi-final debutants Persepolis as Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran square off in the last four for only the second time since the AFC Champions League began 15 years ago. Another semi-final first-timer, China's Shanghai SIPG, will play 2007 AFC Champions League winners Urawa Red Diamonds of Japan in a game that sees two of the tournament's highest-scoring teams go head-to-head.

After playing out a scoreless draw with 2016 runners-up Al Ain in the first leg of the quarter-finals in August, Al Hilal booked their place in the last four for the third time in four years thanks to a 3-0 victory in Riyadh three weeks later.

Carlos Eduardo headed in Nicolas Mileti's free-kick on 42 minutes, before the Brazilian was again teed up by the Uruguayan to volley home a superb second on the stroke of half-time.

Al Ain pushed forward after the restart but Carlos Eduardo wrapped up his hat-trick, and Al Hilal's place in the semi-finals, with a cool finish 16 minutes from time to cap an excellent performance that outlined their title credentials.

Omar Al Soma took just two minutes to open the scoring for Al Ahli against Persepolis in the first leg of their quarter-final, before new Brazilian acquisition Leonardo doubled the advantage as the hour approached.

But Shojae Khalilzadeh pulled one back for Persepolis with 20 minutes to play before Nigerian Godwin Mensha came off the bench to level with a 20-yard drive six minutes from time to leave the fixture in the balance.

Persepolis picked up where they left off in the second leg as Ali Alipour gave the Iranian side an early lead, only for Kamaledin Kamyabinia to see red after 12 minutes to hand Al Ahli the initiative.

Saleh Al Amri produced a superb equaliser seven minutes after the restart, but defender Motaz Hawsawi was then dismissed for the Saudi side for handling on the line to allow Mensha to put Persepolis in front from the spot on 83 minutes.

There was still time for the Tehran-based



club to add a third as top scorer Mehdi Taremi bagged his seventh of the campaign with a penalty four minutes into injury time.

An all-Chinese affair in the East saw Shanghai SIPG host two-time AFC Champions League winners Guangzhou Evergrande in the first leg of the quarter-finals.

Minus the Barcelona-bound Paulinho, Guangzhou capitulated as Hulk and captain Wang Shenchao handed Shanghai a two-goal advantage at half-time, before Wu Lei's second-half brace seemingly gave Andre Villas-Boas' side an unassailable lead.

But Luiz Felipe Scolari's team came out all guns blazing in the return fixture as a first-half double from Brazilian Alan gave supporters inside Tianhe Stadium genuine hope of a comeback.

Fellow Brazilian Ricardo Goulart then headed two goals in the final seven minutes to force extra-time, before Hulk maintained his record of scoring in every game he's played in by curling home a stunning free-kick after Shanghai's Wang Jiajie had been sent off.

The visitors were then reduced to nine men when Wang was dismissed for fouling Alan in the box and Goulart dispatched the ensuing spot kick to mean the tie would be decided from the spot.

Goulart struck the post with the first effort and, after the next eight penalties were successful, Yu Hai ensured it was Shanghai who advanced by finishing low to Zeng Cheng's left.

There was no less drama in the second quarter-final in the East when a Yu Kobayashi double and another by Elsinho saw Kawasaki Frontale post a 3-1 first-leg win over Urawa Red Diamonds, although Yuki Muto's away goal would ultimately prove crucial.

Kawasaki were seemingly coasting towards the last four in the second leg as Elsinho netted his second of the tie on 19 minutes, although Shinzo Koroki restored parity on the night on 35 minutes.

Shintaro Kurumaya's dismissal three minutes later gave Urawa fresh impetus and substitute Zlatan Ljubijankic's header with 20 minutes remaining ensured a frantic final.

Brazilian Rafael Silva then levelled the tie on aggregate with a neat turn and finish on 84 minutes and Takagi Toshiyuki volleyed in to complete an extraordinary comeback as Urawa won 4-1 to break Kawasaki hearts and return to the semi-finals for the first time since 2008.



QUARTER-FINALS			
 Al Ain v Al Hilal 21/08/17 Al Ain 0 Al Hilal 0 11/09/17 Al Hilal 3 (Carlos Eduardo 42, 45+1, 74) Al Ain 0  Al Hilal win 3-0 on aggregate	 Al Ahli v Persepolis 22/08/17 Persepolis 2 (Shojae Khalilzadeh 71, Godwin Mensha 84) Al Ahli 2 (Omar Al Soma 2, Leonardo 58) 12/09/17 Al Ahli 1 (Saleh Al Amri 52) Persepolis 3 (Ali Alipour 5, Godwin Mensha 83 pen, Mehdi Taremi 90+4 pen)  Persepolis win 5-3 on aggregate	 Shanghai SIPG v Guangzhou Evergrande 22/08/17 Shanghai SIPG 4 (Hulk 39 pen, Wang Shenchao 45+1, Wu Lei 62, 65) Guangzhou Evergrande 0 12/09/17 Guangzhou Evergrande 5 (Alan 21, 35, Ricardo Goulart 83, 90+1, 117 pen) Shanghai SIPG 1 (Hulk 111)  Shanghai SIPG win 5-4 on penalties after 5-5 aggregate draw	 Kawasaki Frontale v Urawa Red Diamonds 23/08/17 Kawasaki Frontale 3 (Yu Kobayashi 33, 85, Elsinho 50) Urawa Red Diamonds 1 (Yuki Muto 76) 13/09/17 Urawa Red Diamonds 4 (Shinzo Koroki 35, Zlatan Ljubijankic 70, Rafael Silva 84, Takayo Toshiyuki 86) Kawasaki Frontale 1 (Elsinho 19)  Urawa Red Diamonds win 5-4 on aggregate



Holders Return To AFC Cup Final

Defending AFC Cup champions Air Force Club remain on course to retain their title after Amjed Radhi's injury-time winner in the second leg of the West Asia Zonal final claimed a 1-0 victory over Syria's Al Wahda as the Iraqi side advanced on away goals after a 2-2 aggregate scoreline.

The holders will face the winner of the Inter-Zone final between Tajikistan's FC Istiklol and JSW Bengaluru of India – in what would be a repeat of the 2016 final which Air Force Club won 1-0.

After coming first and second in Group B, Air Force Club and Al Wahda booked their place in the West Asia Zone semi-finals, where the holders overcame compatriots Al Zawraa and the Syrians defeated Al Wehdat of Jordan in May.

The sides then had to wait two and a half months for their next action on the continent, and it was Al Wahda who looked the more promising in the first leg in mid-September.

An early goal from Anas Bouta and another from Hadi Al Masri midway through the second half gave the Damascus club a two-goal advantage in Saida.

But last year's 16-goal top scorer Hammadi Ahmed – who has failed to find the same consistency in the current edition – scored what would ultimately prove a crucial goal at the death in a 2-1 defeat.

Two weeks later in Doha, Al Wahda had the chance to extend their lead but Mohammad Al Ghabbash missed from the spot inside 10 minutes.

Air Force Club struggled to create chances as Al Wahda held firm but, just as it appeared the Syrian side would return to the final for the first time since the inaugural competition in 2004, substitute Radhi headed home Humam Tareq's cross to ensure it was the holders who advanced.

Elsewhere, Ceres Negros of the Philippines were crowned ASEAN Zonal champions in early August after reversing a 2-1 first-leg



deficit against Singapore's Home United to run out 3-2 aggregate winners as goals from Jose Porteria and Manuel Ott secured a 2-0 victory in Bacolod City.

The win set up an Inter-Zone semi-final clash with 2015 runners-up and Central Asia Zonal champions Istiklol, but a 4-0 defeat in Hisor gave The Busmen a mountain to climb ahead of the second leg.

Manuel Herrera's first-half goal offered Ceres some hope of an unlikely comeback in the return fixture, but Dmitri Barkov levelled seconds before the interval to put the game beyond the Filipino team as the tie ended 5-1 on aggregate.

South Asia Zonal champions Bengaluru, meanwhile, were paired with East Asia Zonal champions 4.25 SC of DPR Korea in their Inter-Zone semi-final clash as the Indian team aimed to boost an already impressive AFC Cup pedigree.

Captain Sunil Chhetri's dinked penalty gave hosts Bengaluru the lead in the first leg and, in a torrential downpour, Udanta Singh and Lenny Rodrigues wrapped up a convincing 3-0 victory.

Three weeks later in Pyongyang, 4.25 missed a second-half penalty and proved unable to penetrate the Bengaluru defence as a scoreless draw saw the Indian team progress 3-0 on aggregate.

The 2017 AFC Cup final will take place on November 4 with Istiklol looking to return to the showpiece event, where they lost to Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim in 2015, and Bengaluru aiming to line up a repeat of the 2016 final, when it was Ahmed's goal that proved the difference.



ASEAN Zonal Final

Home United	02/08/2017 Home United 2 (Stipe Plazibat 11 pen, Haris Harun 83) Ceres Negros 1 (Martin Steuble 45+3)
VS	
Ceres Negros	09/08/2017 Ceres Negros 2 (Jose Porteria 2, Manuel Ott 42) Home United 0
Ceres Negros win 3-2 on aggregate	

Inter-Zone Semi-Final

FC Istiklol	VS	Ceres Negros
22/08/2017 FC Istiklol 4 (Akhtam Nazarov 25, Romish Dzhalilov 45, Manuchehr Dzhalilov 67, 88) Ceres Negros 0		12/09/2017 Ceres Negros 1 (Manuel Herrera 34) FC Istiklol 1 (Dmitri Barkov 45+1)
FC Istiklol win 5-1 on aggregate		
JSW Bengaluru	VS	4.25 SC
23/08/2017 JSW Bengaluru 3 (Sunil Chhetri 33 pen, Udanta Singh 51, Lenny Rodrigues 77) 4.25 SC 0		13/09/2017 4.25 SC 0 JSW Bengaluru 0
JSW Bengaluru win 3-0 on aggregate		

West Zone Final

Al Wahda	VS	Air Force Club
12/09/2017 Al Wahda 2 (Anas Bouta 3, Hadi Al Masri 64) Air Force Club 1 (Hammadi Ahmed 90)		26/09/2017 Air Force Club 1 (Amjed Radhi 90+4) Al Wahda 0
Air Force Club win on away goals		



Continental Joy For Chonburi Bluewave

Suphawut Thueanklang scored a hat-trick as Thailand's Chonburi Bluewave defeated the Islamic Republic of Iran's Sanaye Giti Pasand 3-2 in July's AFC Club Futsal Championship final in Ho Chi Minh City to lift the title for the second time.

The Chonburi number nine put his side in front on 13 minutes before doubling the advantage from the spot almost immediately after to take a commanding lead into the interval.

Ahmad Esmaeilpour capitalised on a goalkeeping mistake to pull one back shortly after the restart and Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh levelled with a fizzing drive on 22 minutes as Giti Pasand sensed their chance of a second continental crown.

But almost immediately, Apiwat Chaemcharoen teed up Suphawut to put Chonburi back in front and his treble rounded off the scoring as the Thai side delighted the travelling support inside Phu Tho Indoor Stadium.

"My players were professional and remained focused throughout," said Chonburi coach Rakphol Sainetgnam, whose side also defeated Giti Pasand on penalties in the 2013 final.

"Of course when they equalised there was some concern ... but I always knew we were capable of getting the winner.

"We achieved what we set out to do here.

We wanted to win the title for our fans, we wanted to do it for Thailand and make our people proud."

Chonburi opened their campaign with a 9-0 victory over Lebanon's Bank of Beirut with last year's top scorer Jirawat Sornwichian bagging five goals, before they topped Group D after seeing off Uzbekistan's Almalyk 5-0. Bank of Beirut's 8-3 defeat of Almalyk saw the West Asians also book their place in the last eight.

Al Dhafrah of the United Arab Emirates and hosts Thai Son Nam took the two qualification places in Group A, on goal difference ahead of the Kyrgyz Republic's FC Erem, after all three teams ended on six points following victories over Australia's Vic Vipers and a win apiece against each other.

Last year's runners-up Nafit Al Wasat of Iraq posted a perfect record to top Group B, three points ahead of Qatar's Al Rayyan, while Indonesia's Vamos FC and Tajikistan's Disi Invest were eliminated.

And finally, Giti Pasand won Group C after a 7-0 thrashing of China's Shenzhen Naning and a narrow 3-2 victory over Japan's Shriker Osaka, who clinched the runners-up spot thanks to their 5-0 win over the Chinese side.

Brazilian Xapa opened and closed the scoring while Suphawut and Jirawat also netted as Chonburi advanced to the semi-finals with a 4-2 win over Shriker in the last eight.

Giti Pasand then brought Bank of Beirut's competition to an end as goals from Abolghasem Orouji and Esmaeilpour secured

a 2-0 victory. The clash of the quarter-finals saw Al Rayyan eventually overcome Al Dhafra as Flavio's decisive goal in a topsy-turvy encounter secured a semi-final berth with a 4-3 win.

Thai Son Nam's impressive run continued with a shock 4-0 win over Nafit as a second-half brace from Nguyen Minh Tri was followed by strikes from Tran Van Vu and Pham Duc Hoa in a resounding 4-0 victory.

But the Vietnamese team saw their dreams of a place in the final dashed by Chonburi as Jirawat scored a treble in a 6-0 victory to ensure the Thai side returned to the final for the first time since 2014.

And the showpiece event would see a repeat of the 2013 final as Esmaeilpour bagged a brace in a 4-2 victory over Al Rayyan despite Giti Pasand having Vitor Hugo Da Silva sent off in the first half.

The hosts then gave their tournament the perfect ending after coming from behind to claim a comprehensive 6-1 win over Al Rayyan in which Iranian international Hossein Tayyebi netted twice.

Giti Pasand's Hassanzadeh was named the Most Valuable Player on the back of a string of impressive performances, while Chonburi's Jirawat's nine goals saw him claim the Top Scorer award for the second successive year. Thai Son Nam, meanwhile, picked up the Fair Play award.



Group A										
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts		
Al Dhafra (UAE)	3	2	0	1	8	3	5	6		
Thai Son Nam (VIE)	3	2	0	1	15	7	8	6		
FC Erem (KGZ)	3	2	0	1	6	8	-2	6		
Vic Vipers (AUS)	3	0	0	3	3	14	-11	0		

20/07/2017
Al Dhafra 4 (Rafael Henmi 2, 17, Williams Oliveira Do Nascimento 31, 38) Vic Vipers 1 (Shayan Alinejad 14)
Thai Son Nam 4 (Pham Duc Hoa 8, Le Quoc Nam 34, Hossein Tayyebi 38, 40) FC Erem 5 (Maksadbek Alimov 19, 31, 37, Dilshat Kadyrov 19, Ulanbek Baigazy 38)
22/07/2017
FC Erem 0 Al Dhafra 4 (Abdulkarim Jamil 24, Williams Oliveira Do Nascimento 36, 38, Hohamed Al Hammedi 39)
Vic Vipers 2 (Jason Barrientos 30, Jordan Constantinidis 39) Thai Son Nam 9 (Le Quoc Nam 2, 10, 25, Phung Trong Luan 5, 25, Tran Thai Huy 13, Hossein Tayyebi 18 pen, 35, Tran Van Vu 27)
24/07/2017
Vic Vipers 0 FC Erem 1 (Adilet Kultaev 20)
Thai Son Nam 2 (Hossein Tayyebi 8, 16) Al Dhafra 0

Group B										
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts		
Nafit Al Wasat (IRQ)	3	3	0	0	17	7	10	9		
Al Rayyan (QAT)	3	2	0	1	6	6	0	6		
Vamos FC (IND)	3	1	0	2	9	10	-1	3		
Disi Invest (TJK)	3	0	0	3	5	14	-9	0		

21/07/2017
Al Rayyan 2 (Diego Costa 8, 40) Vamos FC 1 (Bambang Bayu Saptaji 39)
Nafit Al Wasat 7 (Ghodrat Bahadori 5, 7, 17, 18, 33, Salim Faisal 31, Rafid Hameed 37) Disi Invest 2 (Shavqat Halimov 5, Bruno Santiago Jonatan 33)
23/07/2017
Disi Invest 1 (Amin Nasrollah Zadeh 30) Al Rayyan 2 (Flavio 2, Lucas Oliveira 17)
Vamos FC 3 (Syaufi Saud 24, Andri Kustiawan 35, 40) Nafit Al Wasat 6 (Farhad Tavakoli 2, Salim Faisal 13, 19, Waleed Khalid 22, Hasan Dakheel 26, Rafid Hameed 28)
25/07/2017
Vamos FC 5 (Andre Kustiawan 2, 8, 19, Ali Abedin 31, 34) Disi Invest 2 (Mehruboni Tillozoda 8, Firuz Bekmuradov 39)
Nafit Al Wasat 4 (Waleed Khalid 1, Farhad Tavakoli 1, Ghodrat Bahadori 39, 40) Al Rayyan 2 (Hazem samy Selim 27, Mohammed Taheri 36)

Group C										
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts		
Sanaye Giti Pasand (IRN)	2	2	0	0	10	2	8	6		
Shriker Osaka (JPN)	2	1	0	1	7	4	3	3		
Shenzhen Nanling (CHN)	2	0	0	2	1	12	-11	0		

20/07/2017
Shenzhen Nanling 1 (Peyman Hafizi 6) Shriker Osaka 5 (Shota Horigome 5, Nobuya Osodo 10, Arthur de Oliveira 16, Sota Shibano 22, Toru Sato 37)
22/07/2017
Sanaye Giti Pasand 7 (Mohammad Zarei 6, Ali

Ashgar Hassanzadeh 6, Ahmad Esmaeilpour 7, 26, 30, Mohammad Keshavarz 14, Mehrdad Jaberidoraki 37)
Shenzhen Nanling 0
24/07/2017
Shriker Osaka 2 (Sota Shibano 1, 30) Sanaye Giti Pasand 3 (Mohammad Zarei 4, 10, Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh 40)

Group D										
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts		
Chonburi Bluewave (THA)	2	2	0	0	14	0	14	6		
Bank of Beirut (LIB)	2	1	0	1	8	12	-4	3		
Almalyk FC (UZB)	2	0	0	2	3	13	-10	0		

21/07/2017
Bank of Beirut 0 Chonburi Bluewave 9 (Jirawat Sornwichian 7, 9, 19, 26, 26, Suphawut Thueanklang 16, 17, Jetsada Chudech 31, Peerapat Kaewwilai 34)
23/07/2017
Almalyk FC 3 (Dilshod Israliev 18 pen, Artur Yunusov 22, Moustafa Serhan 38 OG) Bank of Beirut 8 (Dragan Tomic 5, 30, Moustafa Serhan 12, Mouhammad Hammoud 26, Karim Abou Zeid 30, Ahmad Kheir Dine 35, Konstantin Sviridov 38 OG, Behroz Jafari 40)
25/07/2017
Chonburi Bluewave 5 (Kritsada Wongkaeo 1, Suphawut Thueanklang 34, Ronmachai Jungwongsuk 36, Peerapat Kaewwilai 38, Apiwat Chaemcharoen 40)
Almalyk FC 0

Quarter-Finals

27/07/2017
Chonburi Bluewave 4 (Xapa 8, 37, Suphawut Thueanklang 10, Jirawat Sornwichian 11) Shriker Osaka 2 (Sota Shibano 33, Toru Sato 34)
Sanaye Giti Pasand 2 (Abolghasem Orouji 20, Ahmad Esmaeilpour 29) Bank of Beirut 0
Nafit Al Wasat 0 Thai Son Nam 4 (Nguyen Minh Tri 34, 36, Tran Van Vu 38, Pham Duc Hoa 40)
Al Dhafra 3 (Williams Oliveira Do Nascimento 17, 29, Helal Al Jaber 40) Al Rayyan 4 (Diego Costa 9, 11, Mohammad Taheri 25, Flavio 35)

Semi-Finals

28/07/2017
Chonburi Bluewave 6 (Jirawat Sornwichian 2, 26 pen, 29, Sorasak Phoonjungreed 14, Kritsada Wongkaeo 32, Jetsada Chudech 40) Thai Son Nam 0
Sanaye Giti Pasand 4 (Ahmad Esmaeilpour 3, 18, Abolghasem Orouji 5, Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh 40)
Al Rayyan 2 (Flavio 15, 18)

Third Place Play-off

30/07/2017
Thai Son Nam 6 (Tran Van Vu 18, Phung Trong Luan 31, Hossein Tayyebi 33, 40, Tran Thai Huy 37, Lukaian Baptista 38) Al Rayyan 1 (Hazem Samy Selim 6)

Final

Chonburi Bluewave 3 (Suphawut Thueanklang 13, 13 pen, 22) Sanaye Giti Pasand 2 (Ahmad Esmaeilpour 21, Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh 22)



DPR Korea Win Third U-16s Crown

Goals from Ri Su-jong and Kim Kyong-yong saw DPR Korea defeat neighbours Korea Republic 2-0 in the final of the AFC U-16 Women's Championship in Chonburi at the end of September.

The victory in Thailand means DPR Korea held on to the title they won in Wuhan two years ago and moved level with Japan on three continental titles apiece.

The East Asians, along with the runners-up and Japan, who claimed third place after a 1-0 victory over China, all progress to the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup in Uruguay next year.

"Our purpose for this tournament was to be champions," said DPR Korea coach Song Sung-won.

"This is the first international competition for most of our players and when we arrived for this tournament, I thought we would win it."

DPR Korea opened their campaign with a resounding 9-0 victory over Bangladesh in Group B as Kim posted an impressive five goals, while familiar foes Japan ran out 5-0 winners over Australia as the tournament's traditionally strongest teams signaled their early intentions.

Another Kim brace in a 7-0 scoreline over Australia then booked their place in the semi-finals, and Japan did likewise by seeing off

Bangladesh 3-0. The top two then went head to head to decide top spot as Japan came from behind to secure a 2-1 victory following Yuzuki Yamamoto's winner four minutes from time. Australia, meanwhile, ended their tournament on a high note as late strikes from Kyra Cooney-Cross and Sofia Sakalis saw the Young Matildas reverse a 2-1 deficit to run out 3-2 victors.

Tang Han scored deep into stoppage time as China claimed a 2-2 draw with Korea Republic in the opening game of the tournament in Group A, before hosts Thailand won 3-0 over Laos to move to the top of the standings.

A comprehensive 7-0 victory for China against Laos moved Gao Hong's team to the summit of the group, while Korea Republic scored three times after the interval to wind up 3-0 winners against Thailand.

The hosts remained in contention going into the final round of Group A fixtures but were comfortably beaten 6-1 by China, who progressed as table-toppers ahead of Korea Republic, who handed Laos a second successive 7-0 defeat.

The semi-finals were clashes of the East Asian powerhouses as China faced DPR Korea and Japan took on Korea Republic in a pair of tense affairs.

After a scoreless first half, Ri Su-gyong's penalty just before the hour proved enough

for DPR Korea to book their place in a sixth successive final following a 1-0 win as Song's team also confirmed their ticket to next year's FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup.

Substitute Tomoko Tanaka's goal a minute after half-time gave Japan the lead in the second semi-final, but captain Cho Mi-jin levelled the scores from the spot on 65 minutes.

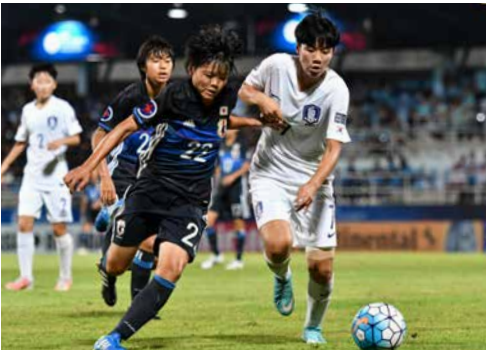
No further goals meant the tie would be decided from the spot and it was Korea Republic who held their nerve to win 4-2 on penalties and advance to a first final since winning the competition in 2009.

Japan bounced back from the disappointment well, though, as Momo Nakao's solitary goal saw the Young Nadeshiko defeat China 1-0 in the third-place play-off to claim the third and final qualification place at next year's World Cup.

But once again it was DPR Korea who proved the top team on the continent as Ri Su-jong netted shortly before the interval and Kim scored three minutes from time in a 2-0 win over their neighbours in the final.

Nine goals in five games saw Kim pick up the Top Scorer award, while she was also named the Most Valuable Player in a night of triple success for the striker.

DPR Korea and Japan have now won the AFC U-16 Women's Championship three times each.



Group A								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/Pts	
China	3	2	1	0	15	3	12	7
Korea Republic	3	2	1	0	12	2	10	7
Thailand	3	1	0	2	4	9	-5	3
Laos	3	0	0	3	0	17	-17	0

10/09/2017
China 2 (Zhang Linyan 11, Tang Han 90+3)
Korea Republic 2 (Hwang Ah-hyeon 59, Kim Bit-na 68)
Thailand 3 (Pluemjai Sontisawat 26, 67, Panittha Jeeratanapavibul 45) Laos 0
13/09/2017
Laos 0 China 7 (Han Huimin 3, Li Yinghua 30, Jin Jing 45+1, Tang Han 57, Zhang Linyan 62, 78, Wang Yument 89)
Korea Republic 3 (An Se-bin 58, Chang Eun-hyun 62, Cho Mi-jin 88) Thailand 0
16/09/2017
Thailand 1 (Ploychompoo Somnong 49)
China 6 (Ou Yiyao 6, Warawat Nanongtum 30 OG, Yang Qian 36, Tang Han 56, 69, Zhang Linyan 57)
Korea Republic 7 (Ko Min-jung 7, 37, 85, Cho Mi-jin 30, 88, 89, Lee Su-in 80) Laos 0

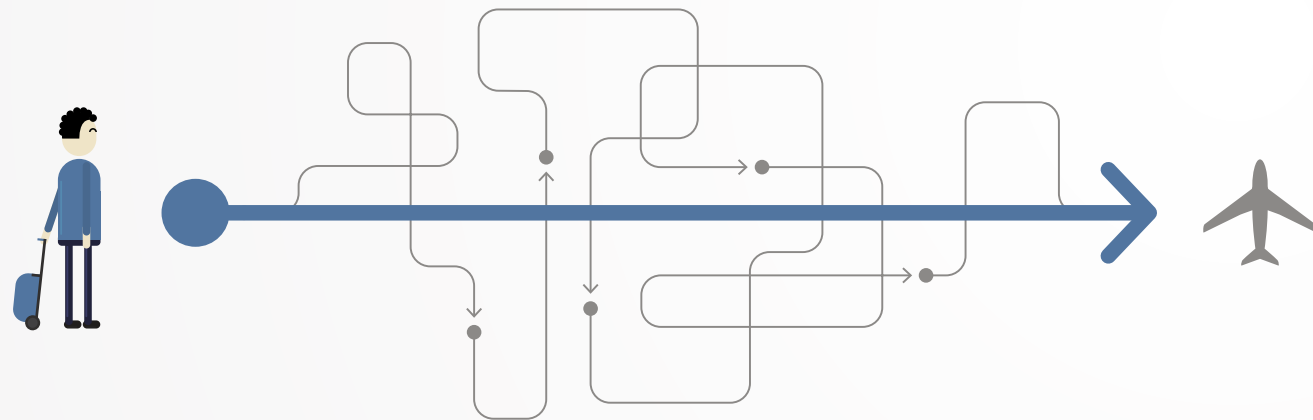
Group B								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/Pts	
Japan	3	3	0	0	10	1	9	9
DPR Korea	3	2	0	1	17	2	15	6
Australia	3	1	0	2	3	14	-11	3
Bangladesh	3	0	0	3	2	15	-13	0

11/09/2017
DPR Korea 9 (Kim Kyong-yong 5, 8, 50, 57, 86, Ri Su-gyong 30, 90+1, Kim Yun-ok 33, Yun Ji-hwa 52) Bangladesh 0
Japan 5 (Haruka Osawa 5, Chihiro Tomioka 48, Tomoko Tanaka 54, 71, Momoka Kinoshita 84) Australia 0
14/09/2017
Bangladesh 0 Japan 3 (Tomoko Tanaka 13, Moe Nakae 31, Yuzuki Yamamoto 39)
Australia 0 DPR Korea 7 (Kim Kyong-yong 5, 39, Pak Hye-gyong 21, Ko Kyong-hui 78, Ri Su-gyong 86, 90+2, Yun Ji-hwa 88)
17/09/2017
DPR Korea 1 (Kim Kyong-yong 18) Japan 2 (Momoka Kinoshita 76, Yuzuki Yamamoto 86)
Australia 3 (Laura Hughes 9, Kyra Cooney-Cross 78, Sofia Sakalis 83) Bangladesh 0

Semi-Finals
20/09/2017
China 0 DPR Korea 1 (Ri Su-gyong 59 pen)
Japan 1 (Tomoko Tanaka 46) Korea Republic 1 (Cho Mi-jin)
Korea Republic win 4-2 on penalties

Third Place Play-off
23/09/2017
China 0 Japan 1 (Momo Nakao 55)

Final
23/09/2017
DPR Korea 2 (Ri Su-jong 38, Kim Kyong-yong 87) Korea Republic 0



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- 2 Self Bag Drop
- 3 E-Registration
- 4 E-Border Gate
- 5 Self Boarding

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Three Teams Seal AFC Asian Cup Passage



India, Palestine and Oman have booked their passage to the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 after back-to-back wins on Matchdays Three and Four secured their places with two games to spare.

Substitute Balwant Singh netted both goals in a 2-0 victory over Macau in Group A in September, before a 4-1 victory in the return meeting in India in October saw the Blue Tigers advanced to the continental competition for the first time since 2011.

Kyaw Ko Ko's stoppage-time goal secured a 2-2 draw for Myanmar against the Kyrgyz Republic in Yangon in October and the sides now look set to contest second place in Group A, while Macau have only an outside chance of qualification.

A 2-0 victory for Palestine in Bhutan on Matchday Three was their third win on the bounce in Group D and a comprehensive 10-0 scoreline in the return fixture confirmed the Palestinians' place in the United Arab Emirates.

They will be joined by Oman after the Gulf nation posted 5-0 and 3-1 victories over the Maldives in September and October to secure a fourth appearance at the tournament.

In Group B, Lebanon captain Hassan Maatouk's stoppage-time penalty in Pyongyang claimed a valuable 2-2 with DPR Korea, before the West Asians moved within touching distance of qualification after a 5-0 win over the same opponents left them five

points clear at the top.

Hong Kong moved into second place after picking up four points in two games against Malaysia, while DPR Korea and the Malaysians occupy the bottom two spots but have a game in hand on those above them.

Jordan and Vietnam are favourites to advance from Group C after the Vietnamese claimed back-to-back wins over Cambodia to move five points clear of their Southeast Asian rivals.

The Jordanians are now above Vietnam on goal difference alone after they were held to a 3-3 draw by bottom side Afghanistan in Dushanbe on Matchday Four.

Looking to progress to their fifth successive AFC Asian Cup, Bahrain saw off Chinese Taipei 5-0 in Group E in September, only to miss out booking their early passage a month later by succumbing to a surprise 2-1 defeat in Taipei.

Vahyt Orazsahedov's 93rd-minute winner saw Turkmenistan move into second place following a 2-1 victory over Singapore as the top three in Group E now look likely to battle it out for two qualification spots.

Finally, the Philippines remain top of Group F after back-to-back draws with Yemen maintained their unbeaten run to leave them two points clear of the West Asians.

But Tajikistan's successive victories over Nepal now means the Central Asians also just two points off top spot with two games remaining.

Group A	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
India	4	4	0	0	8	1	7	12
Kyrgyz Republic	3	1	1	1	3	3	0	4
Myanmar	3	1	1	1	6	3	3	4
Macau	4	0	0	4	1	11	-10	0

05/09/2017	11/10/2017
Macau 0 India 2	India 4 Macau 1
10/10/2017	
Myanmar 2 Kyrgyz Republic 2	

Group B	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Lebanon	4	3	1	0	11	3	8	10
Hong Kong	4	1	2	1	4	4	0	5
DPR Korea	3	0	2	1	3	8	-5	2
Malaysia	3	0	1	2	2	5	-3	1

05/09/2017	10/10/2017
DPR Korea 2 Lebanon 2	Hong Kong 2 Malaysia 0
Malaysia 1 Hong Kong 1	Lebanon 5 DPR Korea 0

Group C	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Jordan	4	2	2	0	14	4	10	8
Vietnam	4	2	2	0	8	2	6	8
Cambodia	4	1	0	3	2	14	-12	3
Afghanistan	4	0	2	2	5	9	-4	2

05/09/2017	10/10/2017
Cambodia 1 Vietnam 2	Afghanistan 3 Jordan 3
Jordan 4 Afghanistan 1	Vietnam 5 Cambodia 0

Group D	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Palestine	4	4	0	0	17	1	16	12
Oman	4	3	0	1	23	3	20	9
Maldives	4	1	0	3	3	11	-8	3
Bhutan	4	0	0	4	0	28	-28	0

05/09/2017	10/10/2017
Bhutan 0 Palestine 2	Palestine 10 Bhutan 0
Oman 5 Maldives 0	Maldives 1 Oman 3

Group E	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Bahrain	4	2	1	1	8	3	5	7
Turkmenistan	4	2	1	1	7	5	2	7
Chinese Taipei	4	2	0	2	5	10	-5	6
Singapore	4	0	2	2	3	5	-2	2

05/09/2017	10/10/2017
Singapore 1 Turkmenistan 1	
Bahrain 5 Chinese Taipei 0	
10/10/2017	
Chinese Taipei 2 Bahrain 1	
Turkmenistan 2 Singapore 1	

Group F	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Philippines	4	2	2	0	11	7	4	8
Yemen	4	1	3	0	5	4	1	6
Tajikistan	4	2	0	2	9	7	2	6
Nepal	4	0	1	3	2	9	-7	1

05/09/2017	10/10/2017
Nepal 1 Tajikistan 2	Tajikistan 3 Nepal 0
Philippines 2 Yemen 2	Yemen 1 Philippines 1

Referees Graduate From AFC Project

Seven participants of the AFC Project Future Referees Programme Batch 2015 have graduated after the two-year programme concluded in September.

The referees from across Asia gathered in Malaysia for the final five-day development course, with the aim to conduct the final evaluation of the participants' refereeing performances and technical knowledge, and recommend the successful ones to the AFC Referees Recruitment.

As the eighth batch of young referees to go through the programme, which began in 2007, they had convened in Fukuoka, Japan to officiate the 2017 Sanix Cup International Youth Soccer Tournament in March for their second development course.

AFC General Secretary Dato' Windsor John, in his closing remarks, encouraged the referees to be resolute

in their training and continue to equip themselves with the latest trends and information.

"In the last 18 months, we have designed the best possible environment and tailor-made programme to allow you to excel," said the AFC General Secretary.

"From technical and physical sessions, you been personally mentored by some of our Continent's best referee instructors.

"The AFC will continue to invest in your development to ensure that you have the tools and resources to meet the demands of modern refereeing."

The seven graduates are: Halim Aqa Shirzad (Afghanistan), Rachel

Mitchenson (Australia), Maddison Rose Kennedy (Australia), Wen Lili (China), Mohammad Mofeed Naser Ghabayen (Jordan), Mohammed Sami T. Al Ismail (Saudi Arabia) and Tuan Mohd Yaasin Bin Tuan Mohd Hanafiah (Malaysia)



Goalkeeping Course Benefits Coaches And Tutors

Fifty-five goalkeeper coaches and tutors gained insightful knowledge and experience from the 2017 AFC Goalkeeping Coaching Tutor's course which concluded in mid-September in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

"Coach education represents the foundation stones for success in technical development and this course exemplifies the AFC's commitment to provide focused and dedicated services to maximise the potential of our Member Associations," said the AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa in his message.

"As goalkeeping tutors and coaches, all of you have a key role to play in educating and shaping the next generation of coaches and goalkeepers in the Continent.

"We want to raise the standards of coach education

at all levels. It is essential for us to create a deep pool of specialised tutors who will, in the long term, improve the quality of football throughout the continent."

The main objectives of the course were to provide further education opportunities to goalkeeping tutors and coaches, highlighting the trends in goalkeeping that coincides with the outline of the AFC's coach education programme.

It also served as a convention to discuss football developments and exchange ideas on the training of coaches.

The four-day course covered a variety of topics such as identifying the modern trends of the goalkeeper, and latest practices and principles.

Practical sessions were also held every morning to put to test what they had learnt in theory, followed by workshops aimed at equipping the tutors and coaches with goalkeeping core competencies.



First-ever Facebook Live Broadcast of AFC Cup

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) made history with its first-ever broadcast on Facebook Live when JSW

Bengaluru FC of India took on 4.25 SC from DPR Korea in the AFC Cup Inter-Zone semi-final on August 23.

The fast-developing and ever expanding AFC digital programme provided an over-the-top (OTT) offering as it strives, under its Vision and Mission initiative, to continue to widen engagement with football fans across the continent.

Dato' Windsor John, the AFC General Secretary, said at the time: "This is another memorable moment for football in Asia. India is one of the fastest growing football markets in the world and now the millions of fans

in the country will have a chance to watch this important game.



"The AFC's Vision and Mission sets out the clear objective of ensuring that football remains the number one sport in the Continent and clearly more engagement in India is vital in that aim. We are delighted that we are expanding our digital offering and at the same time connecting with so many other stakeholders."

In addition to the live stream, the new partnership with Facebook will raise

football's profile in India as there will be a wide-range of other activations to attract a new audience to the world game.

AFC Medical Centres To Raise Medicine Standards

The Asian Football Confederation's commitment to protect and promote the health and wellbeing of players in the continent was strengthened after the AFC Medical Committee approved the guidelines and

accreditation process for recognition as an AFC Medical Centre of Excellence following discussions in Chengdu, China in September.

The application process to be inducted into the AFC Medical Centres of Excellence network will start from January 2018. As part of the rigorous endorsement process, medical centres in Asia will be required to demonstrate leadership in clinical, research and education expertise, injury-prevention measures as well as experience in managing top-level football competitions.

AFC Medical Committee Chairman Dato' Dr Gurcharan Singh, who led the discussions in Chengdu, said: "Football medicine has evolved immensely over the

years. It is therefore imperative for Asia to ensure that our players are given the best possible diagnosis, treatment and aftercare attention.

"The AFC Medical Centres of Excellence will not only improve the accessibility and service delivery to players but ultimately ensure that footballers are in the best possible condition to achieve success on the world stage, as underlined in the AFC's Vision and Mission."

The Committee also approved the tagline and theme of the 6th AFC Medical Conference in Chengdu, and commemorated the launch of the new conference logo prior to the meeting.

Boasting the new tagline "Football & Sports Medicine – New Horizon," the quadrennial high-level conference will bring together internationally recognised experts from around the globe to share the latest trends and discuss future challenges in sports science and medicine over three days from March 6 to 8, 2019.



Asian Members Elected To FIFA Council

The fourth AFC Grassroots panel meeting was held in Malaysia at the beginning of September. The panel confirmed that grassroots in Asia is viewed as 'football for all', comprising personal, health, sporting and social development for non-elite and non-professional football players across all ages.

A football player's pathway was then analysed, to further understand the link of grassroots efforts and the elite game of football academies, before the panel assessed the AFC Grassroots Charter by appointing panel members to monitor and evaluate the process.

This AFC Grassroots endorsement programme is offered at three levels: bronze, silver and gold. At the entry level (bronze), the emphasis is on mass participation, which Macau, Sri Lanka and Vietnam have applied for.

China, Lebanon, Mongolia and Singapore have

applied for the silver level, which focuses on increased levels of quality. At gold level, applied for by Australia and Japan, the endorsed members will set the benchmark for grassroots development.

The panel discussed the proposed four versus four grassroots festival project for boys, girls, veterans and disability players. This package will include coach education for parents and volunteers, a manual for the code of conduct, as well as providing facilities and equipment.

The panel was also briefed about the 2017 AFC Grassroots Football Day, held in May, which was a resounding success with 40

Member Associations and 90,000 children participating across the continent.

Three new AFC Special Grassroots Awards will be introduced in 2018 – the Best Grassroots Leader, the Best Grassroots Project and the Best Grassroots Club.



Inaugural AFC Associations Committee Meeting Held

The first Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Associations Committee meeting was held in the Lebanese capital Beirut at the end of August under the chairmanship of Hachem Haidar (LIB).

The AFC Associations Committee was ratified as a Standing Committee by the AFC Congress in May 2017 in Manama, Bahrain, and its main role is dealing with the relationship between the AFC and its Member Associations.

The Committee will also aid Member Associations to adhere to their respective Statutes and those of the AFC, as well as by making proposals for closer cooperation between the AFC and its Member Associations.

"This Committee's role is crucial and directly connected to the ambitious AFC Vision and Mission which sets out Member Association Development

as one of its key objectives," said Mr Haidar, who is also the President of the Lebanese Football Association.

Some of the Committee's key recommendations to the AFC Executive Committee included the introduction of 'awareness' workshops in the five AFC zones for government sports officials, addressing the need for protecting the autonomy of the AFC Member Associations.

The recommendations also included regular bilateral meetings

between the AFC and its Member Associations to forge closer relationships.

The Committee also agreed to assist the Northern Mariana Islands Football Association in its dialogue with FIFA regarding membership.



AFC Award Winner Joins Elite Club Coaches Forum

Building on the success of the inaugural Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Elite Club Coaches Forum, the second event was held in Shanghai at the end of August and was attended by top coaches from across Asia.

Among those attending the two-day forum were Choi Kang-hee, the 2016 AFC Coach of the Year, as well as coaches from Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, China PR, Korea Republic, Japan and Australia.

Former England coach Fabio Capello, now with Jiangsu FC in China, was also in the group along with ex-AI Ahli manager Christian Gross and Shanghai SIPG coach Andre Villas-Boas.

Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, the AFC President, said that the event was in line with the AFC's Vision and Mission.

"I am delighted that so many club coaches and technical directors

are in Shanghai to be a part of this second forum which will help deliver the AFC's objectives of improving the technical skills and competitiveness of Asian teams, said the AFC President.

"These experienced coaches will provide the AFC with some crucial learnings and I am grateful for their contribution to football in Asia."

Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director, was delighted at the growing influence of the event. He said: "This gathering is unique in Asia because it gives the coaches from all the top clubs a chance to share ideas, innovations and, in some

cases, their challenges.

"They have the chance to make suggestions on the future direction of elite club football in Asia and an input into the structure and format of the AFC's top club competition. They can also look at some of the new technical developments in the world game."



Social Development Partnership Signed

The Asian Football Confederation's commitment to inspire hope and enrich lives through football marked another significant milestone with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

The ceremony, which took place at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur at the end of August, strengthened the foundations and partnership with the AFC Dream Asia Foundation which was launched in March this year.

Speaking at the opening of the signing agreement, AFC General Secretary Dato' Windsor John said: "Football continues to serve as a powerful platform to empower the most vulnerable segments of society and unite communities all across the continent.

"Drawing on the networks of world's leading organisations, we want to plant the seeds of hope to grow opportunities for the most marginalised people in

Asia to live more meaningful lives through the joys of the beautiful game.

"Today's partnership with the International Federation of Red Cross brings to life our aspirations under the banner of One Asia, One Goal."

The MoU, combines the AFC's objective of undertaking effective social responsibility campaigns and the IFRC's commitment to 'Partner for more resilient communities'.

The AFC is joining the IFRC's 'One Billion Coalition for Resilience, global initiative, enabling one billion people to take active steps to work towards a world where everyone is safer, healthier and can thrive, even in the face of adversity.

Through the AFC Dream Asia Foundation, the cooperation will provide a framework for regional collaboration between the AFC, its Member Associations, the IFRC and its National Societies across Asia.



Zayed Sports City Stadium

Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Set to host the grand finale of the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019, Zayed Sports City Stadium in Abu Dhabi is among the most iconic venues in the Gulf region. Opened in January 1980, initially with a capacity of 60,000, the stadium has since hosted Gulf Cups, the 1996 AFC Asian Cup,

the 2003 FIFA Under-20 World Cup, FIFA World Club Cups and regularly stages the UAE President's Cup final. After major renovation in 2009, the traditional, open-air venue now features 42,355 general entry seats, 1,436 hospitality seats and 277 media seats. Iconic arches define its exterior, where a pre-event plaza and a series of fountains offer a scenic route to the central masterpiece.

Within the grounds of the stadium is a 5,000-seat tennis arena, a 26,340-plus sqm outdoor festival space, an Olympic-sized ice rink with a 1,280 capacity and a 1,000-guest event dome. But it is football that takes centre stage and, after penalty shootout heartache against Saudi Arabia in the 1996 AFC Asian Cup final, hosts UAE will look to return to the showpiece event at the beginning of 2019.



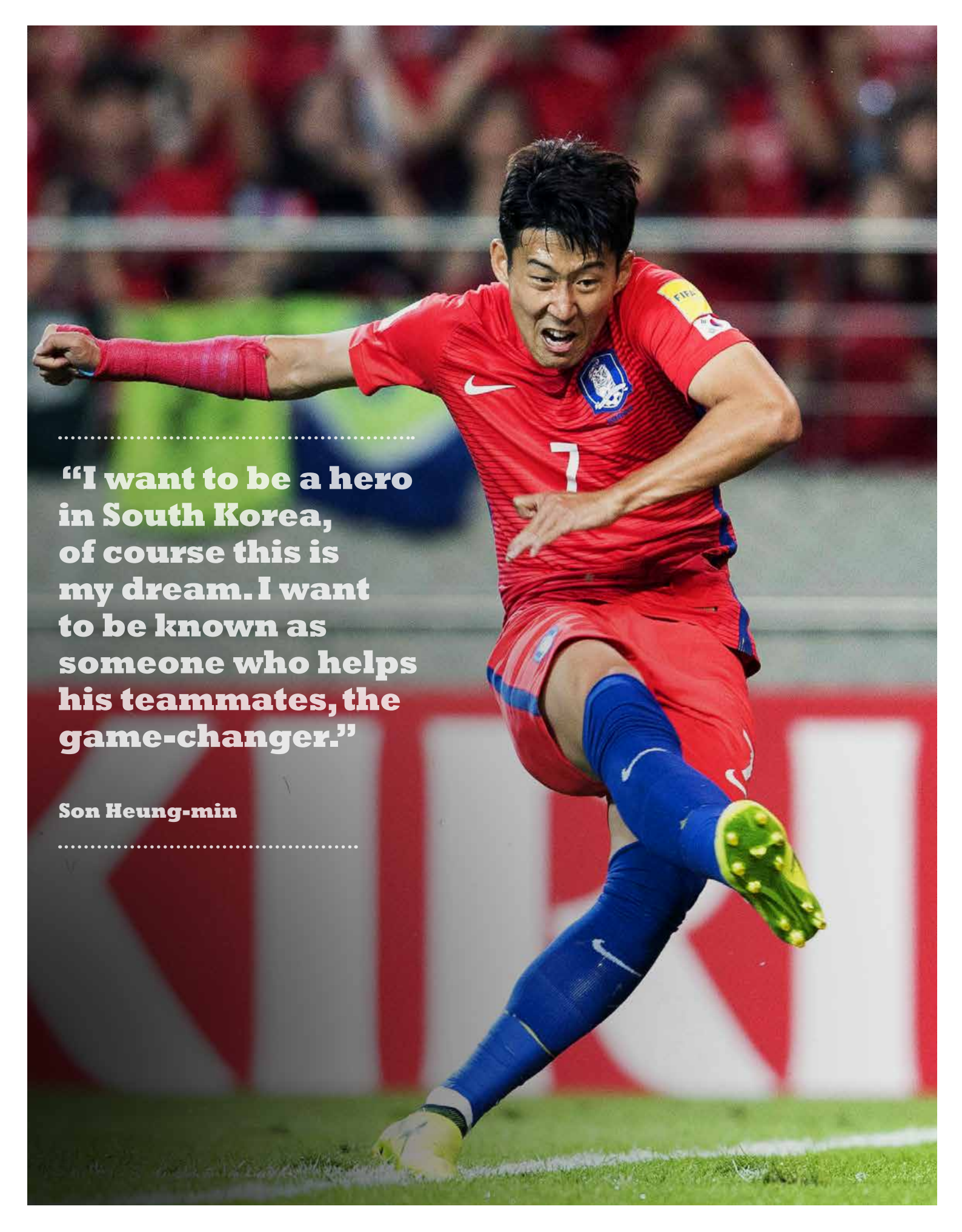
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Hello Tomorrow



A full-page background image of Son Heung-min in a red South Korean national football team jersey, number 7, captured in a dynamic pose as if he has just kicked a ball. He is wearing blue socks and yellow-green cleats. The background is a blurred stadium filled with spectators.

.....
**“I want to be a hero
in South Korea,
of course this is
my dream. I want
to be known as
someone who helps
his teammates, the
game-changer.”**

Son Heung-min

.....